Simon Hastings

F. M. TIBBOTT

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This is a notable period novel, a story of northern Maine during the Civil War and for a quarter-century after. It is not an "historical" novel in the sense that famous personages or events appear in it. True, the draft provides an exciting episode, and soldiers come home wounded and broken from the southern battlefields; true, President Harrison and the "Plumed Knight," Maine's great man, James G. Blaine, are mentioned. But that is about all.

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SIMON HASTINGS

A Novel of Maine's North Country

SIMON HASTINGS

By

F. M. TIBBOTT

WOMAN'S ASSOCIATION
August 1942
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First Edition

To My Wife

SIMON HASTINGS

1

THE wagon moved ponderously. Every revolution of its wheels set it fifteen feet ahead. It rolled out of the thin woods along the river bank and jolted solidly down the slope to the bridge. Unconsciously, the girl on the high seat braced herself and gathered closer to her the blanketed bundle in her lap. The movement tightened the full skirt and long sleeves of her dress, outlining her sharp knees and the thinness of her arms and legs, at the same time showing a wiry strength in the ease with which she lifted the heavy bundle and held it to her breast. A small black bonnet made a ruffled frame about her face, accentuating the long delicate sweep of her jaw to the pointed chin, the wide sensitive mouth, the bloodless lips and cheeks that gave her face the look of ivory. Her eyes, fixed on the town across the river, were wide and darkly full of some tragic thing that had overtaken her.

She was oblivious of the jolting wagon, of her precarious seat above the oxen's rumps, of her husband who strode beside the near ox's head, alert and quick of movement. Her mind was on another time, on the springtime of nearly a year and a half ago and another man; the tawny giant of a man, her first husband and the father of the six-months-old baby in her arms. She could see him now as she had seen him then, riding down the river and into her life, standing like a Viking on the king log, the long pick pole balanced across his thighs, leading his drive of ten thousand logs into the booms above the sawmill.

She could see his startled look and feel the leap of her heart as he came up from the mill and saw her and stopped. And time, for her, had stopped as they stood there looking at each

other. She was caught in a wild uplift of emotion, and the next ten days were a continuation of this whirling ecstasy, a vivid blur of Simon Hastings—watching the boyish laughter in his eyes and on his lips, listening to the gentle depths of his voice, feeling the incredible strength of his arms that sometimes broke restraint and left her gasping. It was all a whirl; their marriage by the black-robed Jesuit, Father Tremaine, seemed more of a dream than real; even the days of their married life were run together in a vivid jumble that defied the naming of time or place; and the tragedy that ended it had left her in a daze in which everything had stopped.

Her mouth quivered and the cords of her throat grew whitely taut as she looked at this town where all these things had happened, where the first exquisite sense of life had come to her and in ten short days lay in ashes, the ashes of a boardinghouse.

The wagon jolted, the wheels chattered, the oxen shuffled, and at their heads Temple Thurston strode, long of leg and short of body. His woolen trousers were tucked in the tops of clumsy thick-soled cowhide boots. The muscles of his shoulder played beneath his woolen shirt as he swung his goad-stick, rapping the oxen on nose and flank, and speaking to them sharply.

"Whoa back!" he said. "Whoa back!" And their rumps dropped as they slid, feet spread and braced.

The wagon swayed, creaking, gradually slowed and came to a stop on the level approach to the bridge. Temple Thurston walked back along the wagon, looking over the load. Furniture was piled in front. It rose above the rails in a closely packed, flat-topped mound beneath its canvas cover. In the rear were farming implements, toolbox, an iron range and a soapstone stove. Plow handles, the curve of a bull rake handle and the high back of a sleigh showed above the rail.

It was an ungainly thing, the wagon, homemade, tinkered up for the journey. Its body was an eighteen-foot hay rack, with sides and ends like ladders laid on edge and tilted out at the top. Two sets of five-foot ox-cart wheels formed the running gear. They turned under the rack rails in offsets cleverly made like seats in the sides.

Behind, with its shafts run under the rack body and tied, was a light driving wagon. And a Morgan mare, sturdily compact,

ears alertly forward, trailed from the driving wagon on a short halter rope.

Thurston came forward on the off side of the wagon. Abreast of the seat he lifted his face. It was a young face, and the long drooping nose and bright black eyes gave it a shrewd look. Black hair hung about his ears, thick and curly. Its abundance made his round felt hat seem a size too small. He looked up at his wife for several seconds. But she didn't notice him. She wasn't aware of him. Abruptly he strode around to the near ox's head, rapping the goad-stick against a boot top.

He spoke to the oxen and jabbed them with the needle-pointed nail set in the end of the goad-stick.

"W'hysh," he said. "W'hysh!"

The damp massive flanks of the oxen stopped heaving, their drooling, froth-flecked muzzles lowered, they leaned against the yoke, the pole chain rattled and the wagon groaned forward. The wagon rolled out on the bridge with a rumbling clatter. Far beneath the spans the shallow water sparkled coldly, rippling against the piers and outcropping rocks. The cords trembled and began to sway to the regular tread of the oxen, and Thurston struck the near ox on the legs and made him change his step.

Just beyond the bridge they turned into the deserted road that paralleled the river. Where usually there were teams and yokes of oxen and the bustle of business, today there was not even a dog in sight. But the girl didn't notice this. She had forgotten that this was Maine's fall Election Day, the forerunner of the November climax between Lincoln and Douglas. She was aware of nothing but those short ten days of nearly a year and a half ago—until the oxen had made the turn into the river road. Then she roused with a start.

Her eyes widened in panic, and she cried, "Temp!"

Thurston glanced back and she made a frantic gesture toward the road they were leaving. It ran uphill, angling from the river between well-spaced, low-eaved houses and on toward the center of the town.

"That's the road!" she cried. "We're going the wrong way!"

Temp Thurston shook his head and spit. "It's uphill," he said.

"But it's so much shorter!"

"It's uphill," he repeated. "And we got enough hills ahead of us that we can't go round." He looked as if about to say something more, and then turned and punched up the oxen.

The girl went numb and cold. She had been ready for the familiar sights of the hill road where her school had been and where she had lived while teaching, but the river road with its dingy stores and boardinghouses, the long mill buildings with their red roofs and the black stacks that belched smoke when the river was too low to turn the water wheels, the lumber yard and across from it——

She closed her eyes and tried to shut it out. But she could still see the smoking ruins; she could still feel their heat; she could still smell the roasted flesh of men.

How could he do this to her? Didn't he care any more how she felt? He had been there at the fire himself. They were his arms that she had been vaguely aware of on either side of her, protecting her from the jostling crowd; but she hadn't even known he was in Wateegan till she heard him begging her to come away. She remembered the unearthly look of his gaunt white face and feverish eyes in the gray light of that early morning. But to her, at that moment, he was the most earthly, the most comforting thing in all the world. She had reached out her arms to him, telling him to take her home, and that was the last she did remember of that terrible day. He had been so good to her then and afterward; but, now, for months, he had been so changed, almost as if he'd grown vindictive. If hurting her was what he wanted, she wouldn't, she told herself, give him the satisfaction of showing how she felt. But her eyes stayed shut in spite of her resolution.

The wagon stopped. Then Thurston spoke to her from beside the wheel.

"Better take a look," he said. "It ain't near so bad as it was."

His voice had a note of solicitude that she hadn't heard for months, and it was this, rather than what he said, that made her eyes fly open. She caught the strange intensity of his face in the instant before he turned, and then her eyes were pulled beyond him, down beyond him to the charred rectangle of the cellar hole. There was nothing but ashes, dead and gray and

powdered, the remains of the boardinghouse where, gossip had it, Simon Hastings had kept a room where he could drink alone. Cora's throat tightened. Why were the worst things always said about innocent people?

"Ye here fer the votin'?" The question came from across the road in the unsteady voice of age.

Cora saw Temp start in surprise and look quickly across the oxen's backs.

Then he said bruskly, "No, lookin' at the fire."

"Fire?" The unsteady voice quavered with alarm. Cora had turned with Temp and recognized the old watchman for the lumber company. He was rising from a box inside the lumberyard gate and peering about uncertainly.

"Over here," Temp said, and flicked his goad-stick.

"Oh, that!" The old man's voice was gusty with relief. "Happened a year ago las' June." His bleary eyes kindled. "Hell of a fire. Three lumber hogs an' Hastings an' that black Jesu't that run in after him—all burnt up; fried to a——"

"We heard about it," Temp broke in sharply.

Cora looked at the old man, wide-eyed. "*After* him?" The words blazed in her mind. But of course he simply meant that Simon had run in ahead of Father Tremaine, as Temp had told her, trying to save the others.

The old man blinked. "Ye—ye heerd it?" He looked disappointed. Then his old eyes brightened. "But did ye hear how Hastings had just got married? 'Y gorry, he did! He took up with the schoolteacher from acrost the river an' married her, all in a week. Anyways, everbuddy says they was married, even if the' ain't ary record of it up to the courthouse. Cal'late they fergot t' git it recorded an' the papers was burnt—on one 'r the other of 'em. And it's too bad. Hastings didn't have no folks but her, and everbuddy that see her git married was dead—in the fire. So the' wa'n't no proof, and ye can't heir prope'ty without ye kin prove you're an heir."

The old man went on talking, but Cora didn't hear what he said. Property! Of course there was property. Simon had told her that his drive that spring would clean up his debts and leave ten to twelve thousand dollars over. And she had for-

gotten all about it. She could offer it to Temp for the Bible!

But did she dare? He had changed so, but had he changed like that? Her eyes filled suddenly. Until she had shown him the Bible she had always been so sure of him, of everything about him; his taciturnity had never shut her away from him before then. It was so different now. And two years ago when he had finally got around to asking her to marry him her only uncertainty had been of herself, of her feelings for Temp and a small fear that their marriage might produce a Thurston throwback like Temp's uncle. It was this, as much as her stepmother, that had decided her to teach that winter in Wateegan. All those months, thirty miles away from home, would, she had felt, determine the question for her. The distress in his eyes when she had told him had almost settled it then. But she had let him drive her to Wateegan with the understanding that he should come for her in the spring and get her answer. And he had come. He'd come the day before she had married Simon Hastings, and he'd hung around, he told her, to see if it turned out all right. She hadn't known he was there; she had even forgotten his existence till he came to her at the fire. His face that early morning! It was the last thing she remembered clearly until he had taken her home to her father and stepmother. Nearly every day he had taken her for a drive or a walk, seldom speaking, but providing a companionship in which she found a growing comfort.

Since her second evening at home, when she had told her father and stepmother about her recordless marriage, it had become more apparent to her that she was no longer welcome there. She could see her stepmother's resentment of her presence, and even her father seemed unable to conceal a coolness toward her. She tried to plan to go away but there seemed no place for her to go. Even if Temp still wanted her, she couldn't, she felt, marry again so soon. And there was that taint in the Thurston blood that, as gossip had it, struck at every other generation, producing a loathsome throwback like Temp's Uncle Balaam. But as the days went by, Temp's companionship grew upon her until she was afraid he wouldn't speak.

She had been at home a month, just a month to the day, when

Temp said to her, "The's nobuddy in town that knows you was married except your folks an' me, is the'?"

"No," she told him breathlessly, sensing what was in his mind.

His eyes seemed full of tiny flames and his voice had a singular intensity. "Ye know I been fixin' up my place," he said, and swallowed. "I'm still figurin' you'll be livin' there some day, and whenever you're a mind to it——" he stopped and swallowed again.

Relief swept over her and her breast seemed to fill with a pleasing warmth. "I—I think I'm ready now," she told him. But a few days later, the day before their wedding, she made a discovery that took her breath and left her cold with fear.

"Oh, Temp," she whispered to him that early evening. "I—there's something I've got to tell you. I—I think," she went on, determined to get it out while she had the courage. "I think I'm going to have a baby."

He looked at her stiff-lipped. Then he gave his head a shake and his eyes flickered. "All the more reason," he said, "why we should git married tomorra. If you're wrong, the's no harm done; and if you're right, it'll give the baby a name." His voice was gruff, almost harsh, but he took her in his arms and held her closely.

Cora was right about the baby, but the blue-eyed towheaded boy, so unlike Temp or herself, was born a full six weeks ahead of the probable time set by the village gossips, and it stirred up talk. Cora and Temp might have endured the talk, but the sneers and laughter stung them, and now they were moving, days to the north, to get away from it all.

The irony of it stabbed at the soreness in Cora's heart. There was no need for there being any such talk! If Temp had only let her show that page in the Bible to her friends, the talk would have ended then and there. She should not have been so quick to show Temp the Bible.

But she hadn't stopped to think. It was too glorious a discovery. She had brought Simon Hastings' things home with her. She couldn't face the hotel room where they had stayed, and she'd had their things packed for her; Simon's in his great

carpetbag. She had never opened it, never touched it; it had been too potent a reminder. But just before the baby was born she felt the need of touching something of Simon's. She opened the bag. A flat package lay on top. She undid the wrapping and found a pocket-size Bible, new. She had never seen it before. She turned to the flyleaf and saw written there her name and Simon's and the date of their wedding and, below it, a Latin phrase: *Ad Vinculum Matrimonii.*

A fit of trembling seized her, and her fingers slipped and caught on the pages as she turned through them; and between the Old and New Testaments she found three pages marked BIRTHS, MARRIAGES, DEATHS, and what she saw on that middle page held her transfixed for moments.

Then she ran out to the barn, crying, "Temp! Temp!" and when he came hurrying to meet her: "Oh, Temp, I've found the proof! Here in this Bible—the proof I was married to Simon! Look!"

She thrust the Bible into his hands and pressed her cheek against his arm as she followed the words that he read aloud so slowly:

> "On this 18th day of June, in the Year of Our Lord, 1859, I have joined together in holy wedlock Cora Appleton, Spinster, and Simon Hastings, Bachelor.
>
> "Charles Tremaine,
>
> "Coadjutor, The Society of Jesus."

Temp Thurston's voice trailed off to nothing at the signature. Cora glanced up, and his expression startled her.

"Why—why, Temp," she said. "What's the matter?"

He wet his lips. "You—you figurin' to show this around?"

"Why, yes, of course I am!" She reached for the Bible, but he stepped back and shoved it in his pocket.

"No," he said, and looked about quickly, as if afraid that somebody might have overheard them. "It—the's enough talk already."

"But—what do we care what people say!"

He gave her a queer look and shook his head and hurried into the barn.

Cora's hands went to her temples as she watched him go. His voice and the way he looked were so unlike him; his whole manner seemed changed. She couldn't understand him and she was too upset to try. She didn't mention the Bible again till after the baby came—a boy, with Simon Hastings' eyes and hair and body. Then she knew that she must have that Bible.

And as soon as she could be up again, she said to Temp: "I've got to have it, Temp. I've got to have my marriage to Simon recorded, so the baby can take his name."

Temp turned to the window and stood looking out at the swirling snow that a strong March wind was piling into drifts. Presently, he said:

"Ye figurin' fer us to go on livin' together?"

Startled, she said, "Why—why, yes, Temp. What else——" She searched his face, but he turned to the window again before she could read his purpose.

After a time, he said, "It'll take some figurin'."

Cora was suddenly weak and afraid. What would take figuring? Did he mean their living together, or about the Bible? She was afraid to ask. And she had been afraid ever since.

Looking down at him now, from the high seat on the wagon, she knew she couldn't offer him the money. But did she need to? Not even Temp Thurston could leave all that money unclaimed when the recording of a marriage was all that was needed to get it. He had started the oxen again, and she was wondering how to begin, when it came to her that this was Election Day and the banks and offices would be closed. But they could hitch up the mare and drive back easily in the morning, and she'd have more time to think what to say if she waited till night.

She looked down at her young son, already so lusty that he taxed her arms. He smiled at her and she smiled back and tried to discount the years to the time when he'd be a tawny, blue-eyed giant like his father; a man in a thousand—in a million men! Another Simon Hastings.

2

THEY followed the river around the town and came to a ledge that lifted in a long ridge running off to the north. They left the river road there and crawled over the ridge to the northwest. The open country fell behind them. Thick woods pressed in on the narrowing road—hardwood and second-growth pine and hemlock. Blood-red maples flamed against the black growth and the yellowish green of elm and beech and ash.

Cora noticed that Temp had lost his air of plodding, that there was buoyancy in his walk. It was as if he were as much relieved to get beyond Wateegan as she was. She wondered at it. Then she found herself thinking of that dismal cellar hole, and not of the fire. It wasn't, as Temp had said, nearly so bad as it had been. Could he have brought her that way because he thought it might make her feel better? Her eyes warmed as they rested on him. Then they clouded again as a feeling swept over her of things still unexplained.

They came to the foot of a long ascent. While the oxen rested, Thurston harnessed the mare and hooked her on in front. He unsnapped the seven-foot trig-block and let it drag from its chains behind the rear wheels. Slowly, with frequent stops, they climbed the long hill. Near the top the woods thinned out to pasture land and then to broad and rolling crop lands and hay fields, yellow and brown with vine and stubble, lifting up to farm buildings and apple orchards just beneath the crest.

The sun tilted into Cora's eyes. Her bonnet had slipped back and now she pulled it forward, tucking in her hair. Two sets of buildings sat across the road from each other at the top of the

hill. Except for some stock in the barnyards and a hound, the farms seemed as deserted as the town had been. The hound came out and barked uncertainly, mechanically, as if from a half-hearted sense of duty. Thurston led the mare back to the driving wagon, stripped off her harness and stowed it away. He took up the chains of the drag-block, fastening it between the wheel rims and the under rails of the wagon to act as a brake. He tested it, pushing it in and pulling it out, till it would drag on the wheels effectively without snubbing them up too short. They moved on down the hill. The drag-block scraped. Halfway down, it began to screech. The shrill sound set Cora's teeth on edge and she held her tongue against them.

Late in the afternoon a horseman passed them, and then half a dozen more; men hurrying back to outlying farms to get their chores done after voting in Wateegan. They looked the wagon over curiously and nodded.

One of them slowed his horse to a walk, and said provocatively, "Hurrah fer Douglas!"

Temp looked at him and spit. "Mebby ye better wait till November," he said.

The man slapped his leg and laughed. "You bet! I'm votin' fer Lincoln too." He looked at the wagon appreciatively. "Good rig ye got there, but ain't ye headin' in the wrong direction fer this time o' year?"

Temp's mouth twitched with the hint of a smile. "Seems as though we got plenty company," he said.

The man laughed and slapped his leg again. "Bull's-eye!" he cried, and rode on.

A little before sundown they came to a shallow stream. The old road forded the rocky bottom just below the bridge. Across the stream a grassy meadow ran along the bank; a clearing made long ago by pioneers traveling north and, from its appearance, still used as a camp site. Temp swung the oxen out on the firm sod. He slipped the yoke ring from the pole and let them stand to cool while he led the mare to water.

Cora tied the baby to the back of the seat with her shawl. She was unfastening the canvas cover to get at their food and cooking utensils when she heard a team of horses coming from the north

at a rapid trot. They slowed as they approached the stream, and the driver turned them toward the ford. She thought he looked familiar, and then she recognized him. Temp led the mare to one side and the horses waded in to their knees and dropped their muzzles.

Cora saw the man turn toward Temp and heard him laugh, and exclaim, "Well, well! Temp Thurston! What ye a-doin' so fur away from home?"

"No further than you be, Lafe," Temp answered. He spoke evenly, but Cora sensed his resentment at meeting Lafe Titcomb.

"Me? Why, this ain't no ways fer me. I been all over. Ain't been home fer a month. Buyin' cattle. What ye doin', freightin'?"

"No," Temp told him.

"'Y gorry," Titcomb ejaculated, looking at the wagon. "Ye got Cory with ye! What ye doin', movin'?" He laughed. "I bet! An' I don't know as I blame ye. Whereabouts ye movin' to? I'll be upcountry off an' on and I'll drop in on ye an' tell ye the news from home."

Temp said slowly, "We ain't figurin' on any news from there."

"Ye ain't?"

"No."

"Well, that's too bad. You know cattle, and I thought mebby you and me might make a deal; you buyin'——"

"I ain't makin' deals with anybuddy from the other side the river."

"Cuttin' loose altogether, huh? Well, that's easier said than done. Like enough me 'r somebody from home'll run onto ye afore long."

Temp made a deft movement, and a vicious-looking derringer lay in his hand. It had two barrels, one above the other, and the bore was large.

"I wouldn't hunt too hard, Lafe," he said.

Titcomb's jaw dropped. His round face was suddenly damp. He drew his sleeve across it and looked furtively at Temp. "Well," he said, and his voice sounded thin, "no hard feelin'. If ye change your mind, let me know."

He clucked to his horses and they waded on across the stream and took the road to Wateegan at a lively trot.

Cora felt a little weak and her hands trembled as they groped in the food box. She got out the dipper and climbed stiffly to the ground. The grass felt pleasantly soft beneath her feet. She went to the stream above the bridge and filled the dipper and drank deeply of the cold sweet water. It made her feel better. She watched Temp bring the oxen to the ford. She could see his face clearly, and she forgot about Lafe Titcomb as she watched it. It was gravely composed, as it used to be six months ago when he was thinking. Six months ago, if she hadn't known already, she'd have called to him, asking him what he was thinking, and he'd have smiled and told her in one word. But now—a vision of Simon Hastings, huge and tawny, came to her, and then faded away, leaving her with the desolate feeling that now she had only the baby.

She filled the dipper and carried it back to the wagon. Across the clearing she saw some dead branches. Pine. She went over and selected one and dragged it to the wagon. Then she climbed to the high seat. The baby was sucking wetly at his fingers. Cora gently pulled them out. His face puckered and his chest swelled. But his yell of remonstrance subsided to a gurgle as he saw her fingers busy at the bosom of her dress. She held him up and his toothless gums fastened noisily on her breast. She watched him. Her baby, and he couldn't claim his father's name. Determination grew in her eyes and gave a firmer set to her chin.

Thurston came back from the stream. He broke up the pine branch and made shavings with his jackknife. He slit a match from its card and lit it. The sulphur flared and sizzled. A little flame leaped up as the shavings caught. He laid on the tips of the branch, adding larger pieces as the fire grew. He arranged rocks to hold the frying pan and coffeepot, and brought in more pine branches. Cora got down from the wagon and fried salt pork and eggs and potatoes, and warmed up cold biscuits. The coffeepot began to thump and steam. Temp squatted by the fire and sniffed. His hungry look and the fine lines at his eyes brought a lump to Cora's throat. She watched him eat and, when he had finished, waited while he got out his jackknife and a plug of tobacco and cut off a chew.

When his jaw had begun its slow relishing movement, she

said, as matter-of-factly as she could, "Temp, what are we going to do about that money?"

His jaw stopped working and he looked at her a moment. "Hastings'?"

She nodded. "Ten or twelve thousand dollars ought to come in pretty handy."

He spit on the red coals of the fire. White ash flakes flew about and a small cloud of steam hissed upward. "Might," he admitted.

Cora's heart was pounding so, it seemed to rock her body. She put her hands to the ground to steady herself. "We—we could drive back to Wateegan—in the morning. It—wouldn't take long."

Temp's jaw pinched sideways as he shifted his chew. His eyes flicked across at her and then away. His face seemed suddenly haggard.

"I—I cal'late we better go on to Council Rock," he said, and got up and went off to hobble the oxen and mare.

Cora sat there, her fingers gripping the thick meadow grass. Her breath came quick and short. She was conscious of pain, like a stitch in her side. What had made Temp look like that? Why wouldn't he go back to Wateegan? Things she hadn't considered before began to take on meaning. He'd come through Wateegan on Election Day. He wouldn't take the hill road and he'd stopped at the cellar hole; but were those the real reasons why he wouldn't go through the town? There was something else, something he didn't want her to know! Was it about the money—or about Simon?

She was changing the baby when Thurston came in from the animals. He looked at her but didn't speak. He climbed into the wagon and turned back the canvas cover. Under it were quilts and blankets spread on two feather beds, one upon the other. He took off his boots and trousers, put them on the seat and slid himself in between the blankets. It was growing colder. Cora pulled the shawl about her shoulders and undressed the baby quickly and tucked him in. She stepped out of her dress and let down her hair and swiftly braided it. Then she took off her shoes and stockings and crawled into bed, cuddling little

Simon to her and repeating his name over and over to herself.

When daylight came, only the numbness of her nose and cheeks told her that she must have slept. The canvas cover crackled stiffly when Thurston pushed it back. Frost glinted on the grass like powdered snow. The steers and mare had a humped look. Temp dressed hurriedly, stamping his feet down into his boots. He put on a short heavy coat and dropped to the ground.

By the time they were on their way again the sun was up and the air was warmer. Uphill and down, but always higher. Up and up. Shorter pulls and longer rests. The last long rise leveled off. It dipped. And before them spread a valley, rolling off in lesser valleys with ridges in between, and on beyond, thirty, forty, fifty miles away, looming blue-black in the distance, were the mountains.

Cora looked across this vast expanse, awed, yet fascinated by the grandeur of it. Somewhere up there in that wilderness, on the west branch of the Caribou River, was Council Rock. The map showed a large township and two small villages. That was all she knew about it, except that somewhere in it Temp had bought a farm of one hundred and sixty acres.

That spring, as soon as the roads were fit for travel, he had begun making trips, ostensibly to buy cattle, which he never bought, but really, Cora knew now, to look for another farm. He'd kept at it off and on all summer, and then he had come home three weeks ago and announced that they were moving. She wouldn't believe him till he showed her the deed, and her look of despair had thrown him into a tight-lipped silence that had rebuffed inquiries. Grimly he had sold their place and stock at auction, saving only the oxen and the mare. And the prices he had got had made Cora feel like weeping. The new place was four times the size of the village farm they were leaving and, even up there in the wilderness where land must be cheap, it must, she thought, be a sorry place to be within Temp's resources; a lonely place, miles from neighbors, miles from the village life she was used to. Looking across all this wilderness now, Cora slumped back in the high seat, weak and heartsick.

Presently her eyes were drawn to Temp. Watching him stand-

ing there looking off across the valley, the realization came to her that it wasn't so much the wilderness as Temp himself that made her feel this way. If there was something about the money, or even about Simon, she wouldn't mind it, she told herself, if he'd only look back and smile.

But he seemed more interested in what lay ahead, and he started the oxen without looking back. The wagon scraped and jolted and slid down a series of pitches to the valley floor. From there they made better progress. Toward the middle of the afternoon they came out on a bluff overlooking the Caribou River. On the opposite bank a handful of houses looked forlornly down on the washed-out remains of a dam and mill building. The road angled down to the bridge and up again through the village. The place made Cora shiver. It seemed so shut in, huddled. She wondered if Council Rock were like this, and decided that it could not be; there was no farm land here.

She set her eyes resolutely forward. Thurston stood beside the oxen, breathing them. His eyes slanted up to her and his mouth curled faintly.

"Fullerton," he said, and spit.

Across the river the oxen set up a faster pace as if even they were anxious to leave such a sorry place behind them. The land was flatter up the valley and the river ran through it in sweeping loops that occasionally brought it within sight of the road. Late in the afternoon the river swung placidly in beside the road and, up ahead, Cora saw the first houses of Brent's Falls. Temp drove the oxen to the tavern yard.

"We'll stay here tonight," he said.

They ate and slept in the tavern that night and crossed the river again in the morning on the long covered bridge and followed the small west branch of the river. Cora looked back at the peaceful village as long as she could see it.

She wished they might have stayed there. The people were so friendly, the houses looked so cheerful, and the woods had been cut back from the fields till she had scarcely felt their presence. When the trees closed in and shut off her view, she faced the road again—the wilderness road to Council Rock, where the Indians might still be holding their meetings on the great flat rock she

had heard about at the tavern. But her eyes kept blurring so she could scarcely tell the road from the trees.

It was a narrow road and always seemed on the point of being pinched off by the forest ahead. Occasionally Cora caught glimpses of the stream down below them. At midday they crossed the stream. Late in the afternoon they crossed it again, climbed a curving pitch beyond the bridge and, suddenly, were out of the forest.

It was like emerging from a tunnel. The open sunlight made Cora blink. She held up a hand and under its shade her eyes swept over a circular clearing, a huge natural amphitheater, two miles or more in diameter, that sloped gently down to the stream running through its center. Far ahead she could see the bridge where the road branched; north across the bridge through the main village, and south up the slope at that side of the valley. And along these three converging roads were farms—white houses and red barns, the buildings small under high-spreading elms and bushy maples; and around them, brightened here and there by the fresh rich green of newly seeded pieces, wide brown fields reached back to pastures, still green, that lifted to the woods.

Temp glanced back at Cora, jerking his head. "Council Rock," he said.

She nodded and tried to keep her mouth from quivering as she smiled. It was such a pretty spot; so homey, so—— She swallowed. At any rate, she told herself, it would be a lovely place to drive to when they had the time.

3

CORA looked ahead at the first farm. It was on their right, a small place between the road and the stream. The house had gables that gave it a queer look in this setting, and she turned to the next farm, on their left.

Its broad acres paralleled the road and reached far back to the woods. The buildings sat back from the road, overlooking the village. The house had deep eaves that made it look lower than it was. It had green shutters and a small front stoop. An ell connected it with the barn, and three great elms spread above the roofs, shading the house and yard. The driveway was on the farther side of the house, and Thurston swung the oxen into it and stopped them in the dooryard. He turned and looked at Cora.

"We're home," he said, but spoke as if he weren't sure about it.

Cora's chin trembled and her eyes filled. This pretty little house with its long ell, all so white and clean; the big red barn and the trim dooryard and at least a dozen houses in sight. How could he——?

"Oh, don't," she cried. "Please don't joke with me now!"

He looked startled, and then his eyes flickered. "I wa'n't cal'latin' to joke," he said, and began working at a pocket, clumsily, as if his fingers were all thumbs. He peeled his pocket back from a package wrapped in oilskin, got out a key and shoved the package back in his pocket. The key and the look he gave her sent Cora's free hand fluttering to her breast. And when he'd unlocked and thrown wide the back entry door and

faced her expectantly, it was so different from what she had expected that her mouth opened and closed and opened and closed before she could find any words.

"But I—— How did you—— Is it—is it really yours?"

Temp's eyes were afire with intensity. "I cal'late it is," he said, and wet his lips. "If ye like it enough."

"Oh, I do! I do like it, Temp! It's——" her voice caught.

An eager look lit up his face, but a lingering uncertainty back of it stopped it short of a smile. He started to speak; then his chin dipped and he hurried to the rear of the wagon. Cora heard him chaining the wheels to the trig-block, and then he came forward and held the baby while she climbed down.

"Look it over," he said, "while I git somebuddy to help me unload." His long legs bore him off with an air of jauntiness under restraint.

Cora watched him, wondering, and her eyes grew soft. Everything he had done had been for her. She turned slowly to the door and hesitated there, like a child about to open an unbelievable Christmas package. Then she stepped into the large back entry. It ran across the ell and she could see the fields through the windows on the far side. Shelves and cupboards were built against the wall, and below them were several benches. A door on the right opened on the woodshed, and one on the left to the kitchen. Midway of the kitchen wall a great bricked-in boiling pot and Dutch oven rose to the ceiling. Cora went into the kitchen. It also ran across the house, a spacious cheerful room. The wide pine boards on the floor were gray and smooth from scrubbing. She saw that the kitchen and Dutch oven flues occupied the same chimney. Across the room from the chimney was a long cabinet. It had an open mixing shelf with inclosed shelves above and closets below. It filled the wall between the two doors that led to the front of the house. And under the windows that looked out on the fields was an iron sink and a pump. Cora gave a little cry of pleasure.

She found four more rooms on the ground floor and two upstairs; clean airy rooms. It hadn't seemed possible that there could be so many, and so large; the low-eaved house had seemed small from the outside.

She discovered that the baby needed changing, and carried him out and laid him on the grass while she got fresh things from the wagon. She was pinning him up when she heard steps on the gravel and turned to see a large woman coming up the drive. Cora straightened to her knees, wondering what to expect.

The woman walked lightly for one of her amplitude. There was no uncertainty about her. But her broad bosom and plump pink face were more motherly than formidable. She smiled and it seemed to make her glow all over.

"I cal'late you're Mrs. Thurston," she said. "I'm Idy Parker. I come up here from Bath five years ago, just like you're a-comin' now, and I like t' died for two-three days afore anybuddy come in. I see Mr. Thurston headin' for the village just now and I says t' myself I'll go right over."

Cora came to her feet and held out her hand, warmed by Mrs. Parker's friendliness. "I'm so glad you did," she said. "Coming into a strange place is so much easier for the men than it is for the women."

"Ain't it, though!" Mrs. Parker declared. "My soul an' body, what a han'some baby! Boy, ain't he?"

Cora smiled and nodded.

"Our first born, Web—Webster was my name afore I was married—Web, he was just about that old when we come up here. I thought I was comin' t' the end of nowhere! You ever been up this way afore?"

"No," Cora told her. "This is the first time I've been north of Wateegan."

Mrs. Parker's eyes misted suddenly and her lips quivered. "That's a place I hope never t' see again," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't know——"

"O' course you didn't." Mrs. Parker gave a little sigh. "But don't you let it fret you; it kind of makes me feel better t' talk about it sometimes. It was Edna, our little girl. She had a bowel inflammation an' nobuddy around here could help her any. So Aussy and me—that's my husband—we took her down to Dr. Byron's hospital to Wateegan. And if it hadn't of been for the fire, we might of saved her."

Cora caught her breath. "Fire?"

"Eyah. That was the worst night I ever hope t' put in. Dr. Byron was puttin' ice t' Edna's head an' stummick, an' the fever was comin' down. It must of been around two o'clock in the morning when a priest come t' the door, and he says the's a man with two-three quarts of whisky into him; he says the man's most dead, but if the doctor could come right off he might save him. The doctor says Edna'll be all right for half an hour and he'll be back by then. But they ain't hardly out the house when the bells start ringin'. Church bells, an' I'll hear 'em t' my dyin' day. They started Edna t' rollin' an' talkin', and some was still ringin' when Dr. Byron got back. He says it's a fire down on the river road; and the feller he went t' look at was burnt up in it—knocked over the lamp, like enough, an' too drunk t' know he'd set the place afire; and the priest run in t' try t' get him out, an' got caught hisself." Mrs. Parker sighed and shook her head.

"When—when was this?" Cora asked faintly.

"I'll never forget the day," Mrs. Parker said. "It was a year ago las' June, the twenty-first; an' Edna died that morning at sunup. It was them bells did it; they started her fever up an'——" Mrs. Parker looked closely at Cora, and cried, "Why, bless your heart, what am I thinkin' of, keepin' you standin' here all this time a-holdin' that blessed baby! You look tired enough t' drop. You give him t' me. I see the men a-comin' an' I'll mind him while you tell 'em where t' put your things."

Cora's knees very nearly let her down when Mrs. Parker took the baby. Her head felt queerly dizzy. Simon had told her he had to be at the mill that night to check over the log scale. And he'd——

She wasn't conscious of looking up the road till Mrs. Parker said: "Not that way; down in our field." She inclined her head to the sloping hayfield across the road. "It's a short cut over the tann'ry dam t' the store, an' that's where Mr. Thurston likely found 'em. This time o' day the men like t' set round Lish Morrison's cracker barr'ls an' figure whether it's Mr. Lincoln or Mr. Douglas that'll get the most votes. Eyah, there's Aussy—the littlest one, next t' Mr. Thurston."

Cora singled Temp out of the approaching group, and it

seemed that every step he took made her steadier and stronger. A sense of uplift welled through her like a sweet fresh breeze, leaving her with only the shadow of an ache. She could see it all clearly now, as she might have seen it at any time since leaving Wateegan, if she'd had the will to face it. She wished she could tell Temp that her might-have-been with Simon Hastings had never been more than a dream; and even that was gone—impossible, now. But he hadn't wanted her to find out about Simon, so she couldn't tell him; not till later, anyhow.

Her eyes were bright and there was color in her cheeks when the men arrived at the road. She looked at the others, wondering what they were like. One of them, by his very size, gave her a twinge; but his resemblance to Simon Hastings ended there. He, Mrs. Parker told her, was Rob Davis, and the square-built boy beside him was Henry Locke; both of them just old enough to vote for the first time. The others, Mrs. Parker said, were married; and two of them, about Mr. Thurston's age, lived up the road; Marvin Grant on the adjoining farm, and Nathan Gregg near the turn.

They came into the dooryard, and Mrs. Parker called, "How-d'ye-do, Mr. Thurston; I been makin' a nice acquaintance with your wife."

Beginning with her husband, she introduced the men to Cora. Besides Rob Davis and Henry Locke, there were Emory Davenport, bald and bony; his nephew, Nathan Gregg, also bony and sandy and freckled; and Marvin Grant, a lusty young man whose shy eyes and soft voice seemed incongruous in so strong a face. Cora looked again at Austin Parker. He was in his early thirties and his face already had a leathery look. But his eyes were young and blue, and his voice had a booming resonance that made Cora wonder at its source in such a wispy man.

Thurston climbed into the wagon and swung down with a hammer and a gallon jug. "If one o' ye wants to tap up them rounds—them that's stickin' through the bottom rail at the tail an' near side," he said, "I'll see if Charles Foster left anything in them barr'ls down cellar."

Aussy Parker let out a rumbling chuckle and clicked his tongue. "Mebby ye better keep the hammer and leave me tend

to that jug. . . . No, no, I was only foolin'," he laughed, and took the hammer.

Temp went inside, and Aussy tapped up the rounds and removed them from the rails. Cora noticed Ida Parker looking at her and then at the baby, and then Ida smiled, and said, "I declare if it ain't funny. You an' Mr. Thurston both so dark, an' the baby a blue-eyed towhead."

Cora's back straightened, and Ida laughed outright. "Don't take it that way, child—oh, I'm an old woman 'longside o' you—ten years older, anyways. Why, like I was sayin', it's just funny. Just like what happened t' me an' Aussy, only the other way round. We're both light an' got blue eyes, an' our boy, Web, he's as dark as you an' Mr. Thurston. Queer how things happen like that, ain't it?"

Relieved, Cora smiled and nodded. "Yes," she said. "It is queer."

The slanting doors of the cellar bulkhead opened and Temp came up the steps with the filled jug in his hand. Ida called and beckoned to him. He went over to her and she took the jug and set it at her feet.

"I'll look after it," she told him, "till you get unloaded. I know Charles Foster's cider better'n you do, an' I know these boys."

Henry Locke called out from under the tail of the wagon, "Don't ye worry about us, Idy. What's a gallon t' seven growed men?"

Rob Davis stood between the shafts of the driving wagon, prancing. "If ye call yourself growed," he said, "git a move on afore I'm clean wore out."

Henry finished untying the shafts, and Rob backed off and galloped to the barn, the mare trailing with arched neck and tail.

"That's some hoss ye got there, Mr. Thurston," Henry Locke declared.

Aussy Parker's eyes twinkled. "Which one ye mean?" he rumbled.

Henry whooped. "I'll take the bay. He's got more sense!"

"He?" Rob guffawed. "You fool, it's a mare!"

"All right, boys," Aussy said, when the laughter died, "let's git goin'."

The range went in first and then the soapstone stove to the front south room. They were set in place, pipeless, and Temp said, "I'll have to measure up an' git me some new pipe down to the store when we're moved in."

"You leave me do that," Emory Davenport urged. "I ain't hardly spry enough t' keep up with you young fellers but I kin fit up a stove with anybuddy."

Temp looked relieved. "Gorry, I'll be right obliged if ye will," he said. "I dunno anything that plagues me more than fiddlin' with stovepipe."

Emory laughed. "You leave it t' me."

Cora moved lightly about, smiling, and even laughing, as she directed the men where to put this and that. It pleased her, and puzzled her a little, to see Temp look at her as if he couldn't believe what he saw. Marvin and Henry carried in the heavier pieces and unloaded the sleigh and toolbox. The others carried in chairs and dishes and pans. In an hour everything was in place. The heavy cord bed and the baby's crib were set up and made, and the stovepipes were in. Ida surveyed the commodious kitchen—the sink with the pails and dishpan underneath, the table and chairs, and the pots and pans and dishes in the cabinet.

"There," she said, "time you get things straightened round the way you want 'em, it'll look like you been here all your life."

She walked lightly to the bedroom and looked in the crib and tiptoed out, smiling. "He's asleep," she whispered, "the darlin'." She glanced out the window. "I cal'late it's about time I put for home. The jug's makin' the last round an' Aussy'll be a-roarin' for his supper."

Cora smiled. "I just can't thank you enough for coming over," she said as they walked to the door. "Please come often, Mrs. Parker. I shan't be able to get out much; the baby's so heavy to carry and I can't leave him."

"We'll fix that right off. I'll send Web over with one of his wagons. Him an' Aussy's the tinkerin'est critters; the's three-four wagons they've made, just the right size for haulin' a baby.

An' don't call me Mrs. Parker; call me Idy. I ain't been 'Missus' to nobuddy for so long, it sounds queer." Ida laughed throatily. "And I hope t' call you Cory."

"Please do," Cora urged.

The men were standing outside the back-entry door, finishing the cider. Aussy Parker held his glass to the light and clicked his tongue. "This," he pronounced, "is the real stuff. The' ain't a cellar in the town that kin turn it out quite so good as Charles Foster's—I mean yourn," he winked at Temp. "And any time ye need help puttin' up a few barr'ls, just let me know."

Temp grinned, and Cora thrilled to it. He hadn't looked so friendly since she'd shown him the Bible. "Much obliged, Aussy," he said. "It's likely I'll need some help. And I'm mighty obliged to all o' ye fer givin' me this lift. Any time I kin do the same fer any of ye, just let me know."

Henry Locke giggled. A lock of brown hair fell down across his forehead and he pushed it up under his hat and hitched his strong shoulders. "You're already even with me," he said. "This here cider——" His mouth went suddenly slack, then he puffed out his lips and blew. He grinned sheepishly, and stammered, "It's sh-huh—sure the high ding-dong."

"And you a growed man," Rob Davis gibed, and hiccoughed.

The men laughed, and Aussy said, "Come on, boys; time t' go."

"Thank you all ever so much," Cora said. "And please come often—Ida."

"Don't you be too nice t' me," Ida chuckled, "or I'm like t' be underfoot most the time."

"And don't fergit to call on me," Temp reminded them. Then he glanced at Cora as if he'd just remembered something; an uncertain look, appealing, that put a tender light in Cora's eyes. She stepped beside him and laid her hand on his shoulder. It seemed to quiver under her touch, and her fingers tightened. They stood there watching their new friends go down the drive. At its foot they all looked back, and Cora held up her arm. They waved a neighborly answer and set off up the road.

Cora glanced at Temp. He was looking at her wistfully.

"You—you like it here?" he asked.

She nodded, and whispered, "I do. You know I do!"

"Enough to—to go on livin' with me here?"

Cora's chin trembled. "Live with you? I'd live with you anywhere!"

"That money——" he swallowed. "I knowed about it all along, and I didn't know but—but ye might be wantin' it—instead of me."

Cora shook her head. She could scarcely speak. "No!" she said. "I don't care—about the money. I only wanted—the Bible—the record."

A light seemed to come from inside Temp, and it grew and grew.

"We kin git it recorded now," he said, and began working at his pocket. He got out the oilskin package again and handed it to Cora. "It's the Bible," he said. "You better look after it till I kin git down to Wateegan."

She barely glanced at the package; she had to watch Temp. He was looking about, at the house, the barn, the village, as if he were seeing for the first time the most wonderful things in the world. Then he looked at Cora.

"It's the best I could figure," he told her simply. "I got quite a mortgage to pay off, but I figured it was worth it. It's a good place and it's further enough off so the' won't be any talk when ye come to name the baby."

A lump came into Cora's throat. She looked at this man of hers and wished with all her heart that he was the baby's father. There would be nothing for her to fear, then; no fear that the baby would inherit his father's love for the woods or love for whisky; no questions over the money that Simon Hastings had left. But now she had these fears and questions to face, and scarcely less was her dread of naming the baby. Calling him "Simon," as Temp expected her to do, struck her as tempting fate to push him into his father's love for whisky and the woods. But could she name him anything else without putting questions in Temp's mind that she didn't want to raise? And there was still another thing to face: the knowledge that, some day, the baby must be told about his father.

4

CORA lay beside Temp that night hovering on the edge of sleep in a delightful languor. Her body had a weightless feeling as if it were suspended in the very silence of the night. As she lay there she became aware of a low steady murmur, like wind in distant trees. She wondered if it were in her head. But it seemed to come from outdoors. She got up and went to a window and discovered it was the stream; water running over the low dam down in the little valley in front of the house. She leaned in the window listening to it until the cool air made her shiver. Later, a sharp metallic yapping roused her. Pale moonlight fell across the windows. The yapping came again, sharper, more metallic. She thought it was strange for a dog to be out there in the middle of the night. And then she knew it wasn't a dog. It was a fox.

She fell asleep wondering if he would steal her chickens when she got some, and strangely not caring. The next time she awoke it was broad daylight. Temp's side of the bed was empty, and she could hear the crackle of softwood kindling in the range. She was surprised at her sense of well-being. Instead of feeling tired from the trip and getting settled and lying awake so long last night, she felt completely refreshed. Getting up was a pleasure and she hummed to herself while she got breakfast, peeping in at the baby from time to time.

She was washing the breakfast dishes when somebody knocked at the back entry. She dried her hands and went to the door. A wiry little boy smiled up at her. His hair and eyes were as black as Temp's and his nose was beginning to show the thin

high bridge which she thought had distinguished Aussy Parker. Behind him was a child's wagon with solid wheels. It had a sturdy look, like the boy.

"Oh," Cora cried. "I know who you are! And I'm mighty glad to meet you, Mr. Webster Parker."

The boy's smile widened, disclosing gaps in his teeth. "And I know who you be, too," he told her. "You're Cory Thurston!"

"How did you guess?"

The boy laughed. "Ho-o, that was easy. I brought a waggin for you to ride the baby in. See?" He pulled it forward.

"For me? Oh, isn't that fine. Thank you ever so much. Did you make it?"

"Why—I kind of helped. Pa sawed the wheels an' fitted the rocker plate an' king pin. Eyah, an' the pole. See? It'll bend up'r down in the houn's. And it's got a crossbar t' hang onto. Where's the baby?"

Cora laid a finger on her lips. Web rolled up his eyes, listening. A faint fretful sound from inside ended in a yelp, emphatic, demanding.

Web snickered. "I bet!"

"Come along," Cora invited. "We'll go in and see him."

Web looked down at the baby, and breathed, " 'Y gorry."

The baby's mouth rounded. His eyes became a deeper blue as he stared up at the strange face. Web poked a finger in his stomach and he kicked and gurgled.

"Look at 'im," Web snickered. "Gorry, I wisht I had a brother like him. Kin I take him out in the waggin some time?"

"We'll see," Cora said. "You know he's only six months old and doesn't know how to take care of himself. We'd have to be careful he didn't fall out!"

Web nodded slowly. "That's right," he agreed. His face screwed up in consideration of the problem. Suddenly he brightened. "I know! I got a hay rack! Pa made it for me an' it'll just fit this waggin. I'll git it."

He dashed out, and Cora saw him flash past the windows with the wagon clattering behind him. She laughed and brought the baby to the kitchen and put him on the floor. She finished

the dishes and gave him his bath and haltered him to a table leg with a rope around his middle while she made up the bed and crib. She had returned to the kitchen and was rearranging things in the cabinet when she heard Web come clattering back into the dooryard.

"Hey, Cory!" he called. "See what I got!"

She went to the door. He was already on his way in with the wagon. It had a straight-sided rack, like a picket fence fifteen inches high, firmly fastened to the body.

"Well," she laughed. "That looks like it would keep him in!"

Web looked up at her proudly. "I bet!" He shook his head and pursed his lips. "But I had a dam' of a time t' make it stay on tight."

Cora suppressed a laugh. He looked and spoke so like his father. She tested the rack, pushing it sideways and lifting it.

"Well," she declared. "You did a good job. It's solid to the wagon."

"Eyah. I nailed it on. Kin I give—say, what's his name?"

"Simon," Cora told him, and then caught her breath. She was glad that Web wasn't looking at her. Until yesterday afternoon she had always thought of the baby as Simon. She knew Temp expected her to give him that name, but now, since she knew——

"Simon," Web repeated slowly. "Say, that's a dandy name. Kin I give him a ride around the kitchen—just t' try it out? Gorry, look at 'im!"

The baby was scrambling on hands and knees at the end of the rope, his eyes fastened on the wagon. He became aware that something was interfering with his progress, and sat down and looked behind him. Watching him, Cora felt her panicky feeling slip away. If she didn't name him Simon, Temp might suspect that she knew what he'd tried so hard to keep her from finding out; she couldn't tell him, now, that she'd learned the cause of Simon Hastings' death.

She began to notice again what the baby was doing. The rope had caught his attention and he was looking at it and plucking at it with his chubby fingers. He jerked it tentatively

and looked at his mother as if to say, "This is the trouble; please fix it."

Cora laughed softly, and Web urged, "Aw, turn him loose an' see what he'll do. I'll keep him away from the stove."

Cora untied him and stepped back. He sat bolt upright, looking himself over. Then he looked at the wagon and started for it, his hands smacking the floor. He drew up alongside the wagon and sat up and looked it over. His hands went out and touched a wheel, then the rack, and he patted it and looked at his mother and squealed.

Cora swept him up and sat him in the wagon. Web pulled it about the kitchen, and Simon let out joyous yelps and beat on the rack.

"He looks," Web laughed, "like a woodchuck in a cage."

The clock began to strike, and Cora glanced at the shelf between the windows where it sat. A sudden thought came to her and she turned, and asked:

"Don't you go to school, Web?"

"Eyah. Started this fall."

"Then hadn't you better hurry? It's already eight o'clock."

Web grinned. "Ho-o," he said. "This is Sat'day!"

"It is?" Cora counted up and laughed. "So it is. Goodness, and tomorrow is Sunday." She wondered what she would wear to church. "When do they have the meeting?" she asked.

"Afternoon and evenin'," Web told her.

"Do you go both times?"

Web rolled up his eyes. "No," he said laconically. "Rev'rund Melcher talks too long. We only go in the afternoon—they ring the bell a half-hour before it starts."

5

SUNDAY afternoon the bell in the meetinghouse tower sent its warm mellow tones across the valley.

"There's the first bell," Cora said to Temp. She put a bag, stuffed with hay, in the little wagon, covered it with a pink blanket and sat Simon on it. The bag gave him sufficient elevation to see over the rack, and his pink cap bobbed and twisted as he looked about. Temp started gingerly from the dooryard with the wagon, and Cora wondered how he felt about it, how long he'd be willing to keep up the pretense that the baby was his own. Her eyes grew tender and she smiled at him; there'd be a baby of his own sometime next spring.

That morning the Parkers had come over and while Temp and Aussy had gone out to the barn and Web had played with Simon, Ida had taken Cora into the yard and pointed out places and things about the village. And now Cora looked about her again. Immediately across the road was the Parkers' hayfield, sloping down to the stream. At its farther end, scarcely a quarter of a mile up the road, was the Parkers' house and barn, and down on the stream below them was Aussy's starch factory, stoutly built two years ago with homemade bricks. A low dam crossed the stream there, making power for the starch factory and the tannery and using the upper end of the island for its central pier. The tannery was on the island but trees hid all but its towering brick smokestack. On up the road beyond the Parkers' was Emory Davenport's small place, and beyond it, facing the hill road at the turn, was the old tavern, now used by Morrill Dow for storing his tanned hides.

Nathan Gregg's place was across the road from the Davenports', and Marvin Grant's larger farm lay between the Greggs' and Temp Thurston's. At the turn, the road forked south up the hill and north across the bridge through the main village, appearing again a mile or so north of the village where it climbed the long rise of Crockett Hill, a yellow thread between stone-fenced fields.

Cora's eyes ran along this road, taking in the village. Above the trees near its western edge she could see the roof and part of the brick walls of the town hall, which also served as the school, and beyond it the white square bell tower of the church.

"Kind of nice to look at," Temp remarked, "ain't it?"

"Yes," Cora told him softly.

He tilted his head toward the starch factory. "Aussy's payin' fifteen cents fer potatoes, and if mine turn out like they look, I'd ought to git around seventy-five dollars fer 'em."

"That much?"

"Eyah. Charles Foster put in three acres this spring and they look like they'd run two hundred or better, staying in the ground so late. It's been so dry this fall that Aussy figured to leave 'em in the ground so's they'd make more starch. But it won't do to leave 'em in much longer and I figure to start diggin' this week—or just as soon as I kin git two-three fellers to help me. You mind cookin' fer that many more?"

Cora smiled. They'd never needed any farm help before and it gave her the same sort of thrill that she knew Temp must be feeling. "Bring all you need," she told him. "The sooner you get the potatoes dug, the sooner you can get at the fall plowing."

Temp grinned at her in appreciation. He was like his old self again, only more so, and Cora's heart sang. The last six months—all their troubles—lay behind them.

Involuntarily, she turned, and caught her breath and quickly faced about again. Behind her was that queer gabled house, empty now, Ida had told her that morning, because of its history. Everybody who had tried to live there seemed to have nothing but trouble, and its last owner had just finished repairs and new shingles when he fell from the roof and was killed.

Cora shivered, and then called herself a goose for being so silly; the house had nothing to do with her or Temp, and never would. She put it out of her mind and looked ahead at the Parkers' low-eaved white house and medium-sized red barn. Ida and Aussy and Web came out to meet them, and Ida said:

"You ever see the beat of this weather? I declare, it's most too good t' be true; near four weeks without rain an' hardly a cloud in the sky."

"Fine fer potatoes," Aussy rumbled. "But it can't last much longer."

"That's what I'm figurin'," Temp said. "I aim to dig mine right off."

Web came close to Cora, and whispered, "Kin I haul Simon?"

"You ask Temp," she smiled.

"Kin I, Temp?" he asked.

Temp gave him an amused look. "Kin you what?"

"Haul Simon."

"Think ye got the heft?"

Web's eyes shone. "You see if I ain't!"

He took the handle from Temp and walked along in front, eyes on the wagon. Every little while he inquired, "Am I doin' all right?"

"You quit pesterin' us," his mother chuckled finally. To Cora, she whispered, "Funny, ain't it? If Simon was his brother, like enough he'd howl if we was s' much as t' ask him t' haul him."

Cora smiled. "Simon's new to him," she said.

"Eyah, but it ain't only that. He—well, he's different, somehow. You take Sarah Grant's baby; he ain't s' big as Simon, but he's bigger'n most five-months babies an' Web ain't s' much as noticed him." Ida glanced ahead. "There come the Grants now. Sarah's pa is our doctor here—Doctor Freeman Luce—an' she named the baby for him; but everbuddy calls him Freem. Sarah's nice. She's—I declare if it wouldn't be hard t' tell you and her apart, if you was off a ways."

Cora looked with interest at Sarah Grant who was, she saw, about her own size and coloring, but was ever so much prettier. Marvin was pushing the baby in a small, high-wheeled cart with

a small wheel in front between two supports. It looked like a handy rig, but Cora liked the low wagon better; Simon wouldn't have so far to fall if he should climb out.

The Grant's dooryard was as trim as her own, but she wondered if their only pump was the one by the door in the ell of the house. Their barn was as big as Temp's but it stood off a way from the house, with an enormous elm rising in between. Remembering Marvin's shyness, Cora wondered if Sarah did the talking for them both, and was pleasantly surprised that Sarah didn't. She liked Sarah immediately, and Sarah seemed to like her.

"Oh, Marvin, just look at that baby," Sarah cried. "And we thought Freem was big! Doesn't it break your back to lift him?" she said to Cora.

"He is pretty heavy," Cora admitted.

Sarah laughed, "Well, I hope he's as gentle as he looks, or Freem'll have trouble when they get big enough to play together."

"Size don't mean so much," Aussy rumbled dryly. "Take Idy an' me——" he sidestepped suddenly in pretended fear and grinned at Ida.

She laughed, and the others laughed with her. They moved on up the road where the Davenports and then the Greggs joined them. Mrs. Davenport was almost as plain and bony as her middle-aged husband. They had no children but were like father and mother to their nephew and niece, Nathan and Nelly Gregg, and grandparents to Nathan's and Nelly's ten-year-old daughter. Little Alice Gregg had her father's freckles but was otherwise like her plump and efficient mother.

"I don't know what I'd do without Alice," Sarah Grant told Cora. "She looks after Freem for me when the Circle meets or we have any doings just for the grown folks. And now that you're here, she can look after both our babies when we go out together."

Everybody was so pleasant, Cora thought. She gave up trying to remember names when they reached the turn and met the families coming down the hill; the Bentons and Lockes, the

Davises and Dows and Bradburys and Grahams; Rob Davis and Henry Locke, with their fathers and mothers; Henry walking sedately but with an impish twinkle in his eye, and Rob ambling along at a stoop-shouldered slouch, one long arm looped across Henry's broad shoulders.

There were wizened Perley Dixon and his wizened wife who lived across the turn, their house facing down the road to Brent's Falls, and there was grizzled Lish Morrison, the storekeeper-postmaster, who lived between the turn and the bridge and whose chin whisker made him look so much like Jotham Davis that Cora couldn't tell them apart.

The Bentons and Bradburys, and others who didn't stop, were driving, and Cora was surprised to see the stovepipe hat worn by Sam Bradbury. It was the only stovepipe hat in the town, Ida told her; and Sam wore it with an assumption of dignity that was almost made ridiculous by his long skinny body and swivel eyes. Cora knew she wouldn't forget the Bradburys; nor Grace and Roger Benton, whose children, filling the two rear seats of their driving wagon, looked as jolly and roly-poly as their father.

Wagons and walkers made a procession now that strung out along the road and down across the bridge. Ida pointed out Otis Wick's box factory and sawmill, one on either side of the stream above the bridge, with a stone and plank dam between them and a connecting covered walkway overhead. Cora looked with wonder at the piles of slabs about the sawmill; old slabs, gray with mildew, and bright-edged new slabs piled on top. There seemed to be more slabs than lumber in the mill yard. Just beyond the mill yard were Russ Graham's blacksmith shop and Emory Davenport's wagon shop, and across from them was the store with its long platform and steps. Then came the houses of the village, strung out along the street on either side, some close to the road and some far back.

The second house from the store had a cupola and weather vane on the center of the roof and another on the barn which faced the road with two large doors like a pair of square, green-rimmed eyes. A small white sign stood in front of the house,

with "FREEMAN LUCE, M.D." printed on it in neat black letters. The front door opened and a buxom middle-aged woman edged out, tipping her very full skirt.

"I declare," Ida whispered to Cora, "if it don't look like Emma's got her wooden hoops fixed. She got 'em around a month ago and busted 'em gettin' into her pew at the church the first time she wore 'em." Ida giggled. "And she said she was——"

Emory Davenport called out, "Hello, Emma. Freem playin' hooky on ye again?"

Mrs. Freeman Luce sucked in her lips and shook her head. "No, he—" she hesitated—"he's up to Perkins'—Veery's havin' her third."

"Well, now," Aussy rumbled. "That's three in three years, ain't it? Seems as though——"

"Will you hush!" Ida told him sharply.

Aussy looked at her owlishly. He winked at Temp and chuckled, and Temp glanced uncertainly at Cora. She felt her face grow hot, and then Ida said:

"Oh, Emma, I want t' make you acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Thurston, our new neighbors. Emma's the doctor's wife," she said to Cora, "and Sary Grant's ma. And, Emma, you should see their baby, he's——" Ida broke off and looked quickly about. "Whatever's come of Web?" she exclaimed.

Cora's hand went to her breast, and Temp threw a startled glance behind him. "There they are," he said, relieved, and started back.

From the store the road had begun a slow rise that became more and more perceptible, and Web was back there struggling with the wagon. Temp came up to him and said, "Well, son, kind of hard pullin', ain't it? Mebby I better spell ye awhile."

"I guess—ye better," Web panted. "I ain't—much good on a uphill pull." He took a deep breath and grinned. "But I kin go downhill hell-a-whoopin'."

Temp took the handle and they caught up with the others and walked on to the church. The yard was full of people, and Temp said, "Must be close to a hundred folks here, and half as many young 'uns."

Web came close to Cora and whispered, "I'll mind Simon if you want to leave him outside."

"Why," Cora asked him, "aren't you coming in?"

"Not if I kin help it. Rev'rund Melcher—he pounds an' bellers."

Cora smiled. "I think we'd better all go in," she told him. But later she almost wished she had followed his suggestion. The Reverend Melcher was young and vigorous in spite of his shining bald head. His eyes had the look of a zealous shepherd full of concern over the welfare of his flock. And when he got into his sermon he did indeed "pound an' beller." He had much to say and drove home his points with his hands and arms as well as with his tongue.

Simon grew restless and Cora was glad when the service was over. But for all her feeling of having been washed and wrung dry, she concluded that the Reverend Melcher was well worth listening to.

Outside the church the congregation split up into shifting groups. It seemed to Cora and Temp that they must have met everybody there, and they were both relieved when people started to leave for home. It seemed to Temp a good opportunity to get some help on his potatoes but, being uncertain of the custom here, he hesitated to speak of business on a Sunday. He asked Aussy about it, and Aussy laughed.

"I got four fellers fer ye already," he said. "If ye think that'll be enough? The's Marvin Grant and Nathan Gregg and Henry Locke and Rob Davis—all good workers, and they'll be over t' your place first thing in the morning."

Temp grinned. "Well, that's fine. I been wonderin' about it some."

On the way home he got to wondering about another thing, and that night he said to Cora, "You figurin' to say anything about the baby?"

Cora looked at him, startled. "Why, no. I—why should we?"

"Well——" Temp hesitated. It gave him a feeling of pride to have people think that he was the father of such a baby; at the same time he felt guilty about it. "It don't seem right," he said, "fer folks not to know, and the longer we put it off, the

harder it'll likely be to tell 'em. I was thinkin' it might be a good idee to tell Idy and let her kind of spread it around that you'd married Hastings before ye did me, and the baby belongs to him."

Cora scarcely knew what to say. "I—I don't see how I could," she told him, and wondered how she could explain. She couldn't tell Ida; not after what Ida had told her about her little girl and the fire at Wateegan; and she couldn't tell anybody else without its getting back to Ida. She groped for a reason and took the first that seemed plausible.

"Oh—I just don't want anybody to know that we got married so soon—I mean, before the baby was born."

Temp was puzzled. "But how are they a-goin' to know?"

"Well, maybe they wouldn't," Cora admitted. "But they could count back pretty close. I—" she flushed—"I'm going to have another baby, Temp."

It took him several moments to grasp what she had said. Then he smiled and whispered inanely, "Mine?"

"Of course, you silly!" she laughed. "And I think it will be in April—about a month after Simon's first birthday. And that's near enough to make folks wonder some, if they knew little Simon wa'n't your son."

Temp felt all jumbled up inside. "Eyah," he muttered. "Mebby it might." He grinned at her in a foolish daze, picturing a son of his own. And it didn't strike him as strange at all that the picture he saw had a lusty body and very pale yellow hair and blue eyes that fascinated people.

6

MONDAY he wielded such an exuberant potato fork that Nathan Gregg, in the next row, said to him, laughing, "Hey! You figurin' t' dig all these potatoes t'day?"

Temp straightened up with a sheepish grin. "Gorry, no," he said. "Just feelin' good." He looked across the next few rows where Marvin and Henry and Rob trailed on a slant behind him. "It's enough to make any feller feel good to come to a strange place an' git help like this."

"Oh, we ain't doin' it just fer fun," Henry said, and rolled his eyes significantly.

"You better fergit about that cider, feller," Rob advised. "The's plenty potatoes here t' dig without you seein' two-three times as many."

"Don't ye worry none about me," Henry retorted. "I'm just waitin' t' see ye fold up them hind legs o' yourn when we git t' pickin'!"

Nathan laughed. "I cal'late we better git some diggin' done first." He spit on his hands and got to work.

At noon, when Cora called them in to dinner, Temp was surprised and pleased to find Sarah Grant and Nelly Gregg in the kitchen helping Cora, and little, freckled-face Alice Gregg was looking after chubby Freeman Grant and Simon. It was the one thing needed to make the morning complete.

"Well," he cried to Sarah and Nelly, "this is mighty friendly of ye. I was wonderin' how Cory'd make out gettin' dinner fer four extry men." He looked at the table and sniffed. "My, don't that smell good!"

"Oh, we ain't done much," Nelly laughed.

"Haven't you, though!" Cora exclaimed. "I don't know what I'd have done without you and Sarah."

"Oh, oh," Sarah cried. "It looks like we'd have to come over every day, now, till the potatoes are all in the cellar." Her laugh rose at Cora's red embarrassment.

"I didn't mean that!" Cora protested. "But I'd like mighty well to have you come."

"And we'll be here," Nelly assured her. "We know what it means t' feed a bunch of hungry men, and we help around at gettin' dinners just like the men trade work."

They came until the potatoes had all been hauled from the field, six hundred and forty-seven bushels of them, and Temp hauled the six hundred to the starch factory, keeping the forty-seven for next year's seed, and to eat. With the ninety dollars he got from Aussy, he bought a fresh cow and a heifer and a flock of pullets and some roosters. The remainder of the money was put by for what they would need at the store that winter.

The haying had been done before Temp bought the place, and the big mows in the barn were full. He had made a deal with Charles Foster to finish cutting the oats and wheat and corn, and now they stood in shocks in the fields. There were sixty acres of fields, mostly hay, and one hundred acres in pasture and wood lot. During that first week all that Cora had seen of the place had been from the windows and yard—both she and Temp had been too busy; but on the morning of their second Sunday he took her and Simon out to look it over.

They went through the barn and Temp opened one side of the big rear door.

"Oh," Cora cried, "apples! I didn't know there was an orchard."

They went down the incline from the door, and into the orchard. Most of the apples were still quite green, but Cora saw a tree where they looked red-ripe and skipped over to it. She broke off an apple and bit into it. It snapped crisply under her teeth and its snow-white pulp was sweetly juicy.

"Why," Cora said, "it tastes and looks just like a Jonathan, but I didn't think they ripened this early."

Temp shook his head. "They're a new kind—I fergit what Foster called 'em, but he did say they tasted like Jonathans."

Simon squealed and held out his hands, reaching over the rack on his wagon. Cora laughed and picked another apple and gave it to him. He put it to his mouth and worked his jaws but his gums slid over the slippery skin. He looked at it and frowned and tried again. Then he looked at Cora with an inquiring expression that said as plainly as if he had spoken:

"What's the matter with this thing? Why won't it bite open like yours?"

Temp laughed and got out his jackknife. "I'll fix it fer him."

"It might upset him," Cora said dubiously.

"Him?" Temp grinned. "It'll be good fer him." He cut a slice, and Simon chewed it down with relish and held out his hands for another. Temp gave him the apple and he found the place where it had been sliced and lay back in the wagon and gnawed contentedly.

From the end of the orchard they looked out over more rolling fields to the pasture and wood lot. Long stone walls separated the fields from the road and pasture, and another ran at right angles to them, forming a huge letter H.

Cora said wonderingly, "I can't understand how anybody could sell a place like this."

"I guess it was a case of Charles Foster's bad luck bein' good luck fer me," Temp said. "I thought likely Idy had told ye."

"No, she didn't. What was it?"

"Well, as I got it, Charles had been figurin' to marry a girl over to Brent's Falls and, along in the summer, she all of a sudden up an' married another feller. Charles was right around my age, I'd say; he didn't have no folks, and when this girl went back on him, he just wanted to git away. And I just happened to come along right then. It kind of give me a queer feelin' to find a place like this that I could buy, and I just had to take it."

Cora caught his hand and squeezed it. "I'm so glad you did!" she said.

Another stone wall divided their property from Marvin Grant's. It formed the far side of the lane that ran from the

barnyard to the pasture; the other lane fence was built of split hardwood rails, laid close together between double posts. Temp took Cora and Simon down beside the lane to where the milch cow and heifer were grazing. The cow looked at them and went on pulling at the grass, but the heifer came over and ran a rough tongue over Cora's arm as she rubbed its head.

Simon sat up and looked at the heifer, seemed to find no interest in her whatever and settled back to gnaw again at his apple.

Temp felt a twinge of disappointment. "Now I wonder," he remarked, "if that means he ain't a-goin' to make a farmer?"

Cora laughed. "It means he's more interested in his apple."

They went on down to the pasture fence. Just beyond it was a shallow, stoned-in pool that was fed by a spring in Marvin Grant's pasture. A small flock of sheep and a dozen head of young cattle, standing and lying, were scattered over the grass between the pool and the woods.

"Just about half the stock we'd ought to have to keep up a farm this size," Temp said. "But soon as I git the corn and grain in, I'll turn 'em into the fields and that'll help out on the dressing."

It was on the tip of Cora's tongue to say they could buy all the stock they needed with Hastings' money, but she decided to wait till they got it and then give it to Temp as a surprise. The idea pleased her and she stood there looking out across the wood lot at Saddleback Ridge. It seemed to begin just beyond the wood lot and rose in a long slope like the back of some prehistoric monster, shaggy green, spotted with yellow and crimson. From this angle its twin humps seemed almost one, and the air was so clear it was hard to believe that the humps were nearly as close to Brent's Falls as they were to Council Rock, but she remembered how it had paralleled the Fall's road for miles. She felt a chill of fear. How long would it be before Simon was scampering over the countryside, through the wood lot, up the Ridge? She looked at him, still munching his apple, and the fear passed. It would be years and years and in that time she would teach him to stay out of the woods.

The sound of running steps came from the stubble and short

grass in the hayfield. She and Temp turned and saw Web coming toward them. He grinned and slowed to a walk as they turned.

"Don't it beat all," Temp ejaculated softly. "Ain't been a day that he ain't been over two-three times to play with Simon, has the'?"

Cora smiled and shook her head. "And for goodness sake don't discourage him," she said. "He's so careful with Simon I hope he keeps on coming, but I'm afraid he'll get tired of it before long." She raised her voice. "How did you find us?"

Web's grin widened. "Hoh," he panted. "That was easy—just follered the waggin tracks." He looked at the wagon, and cried, "Hey, Simon, how ye be?"

Simon had squirmed around, and now he let out a squeal and waved his apple at Web.

"Look at 'm," Web laughed, "eatin' apples. Hey, gimme a bite!" He reached for the apple, and Simon let him take it. "Gorry!" Web flashed his gap-toothed grin. "I didn't think he'd let me have it." He wiped the apple on his sleeve and bit out a chunk and handed it back. Simon looked at him and then at Cora, as if he couldn't understand how they could bite out chunks and he couldn't do it himself. He looked at the hole that Web had made and went after the apple with such determination that the others laughed.

"Well, son," Temp said to Web, "ye got here just in time to haul Simon back home."

Web glanced up the rolling slope to the barn and his face lengthened. "Gorry," he said, with his mouth full of apple. He chewed rapidly and was gulping it down when he caught the twinkle in Temp's eyes. "Aw," he cried, "you was only foolin'!"

"Eyah," Temp laughed. "That's what I was. But ye kin git behind and give it a push if you're a mind to."

The next day he started hauling the wheat and oats to Jessup's Mills. It was five miles to the northwest over Crockett Hill and it irked him to have so far to go, but the only threshing machine in the township was there, hooked to the mill wheel in Porcupine Stream. And they could grind his grain there as well as bolt and clean his wheat. He hauled the straw home and it

made a great yellow slippery mound in the angle between the barn and the sheep shed. What the stock didn't eat would go for bedding. He put the barreled flour in the milk room, and the meal and whole oats in bins in the barn. He stacked the corn fodder in the barn cellar, standing it upright against the deep hay bays across from the cattle tie-ups, and piled the ears ready for husking at the back of the barn floor.

By the end of October he had finished his fall plowing; the potato and grain pieces were turned over and ten acres of run-out hay land were broken, harrowed and dragged smooth, ready for seeding to grass and clover on the last of the snow next spring. It was a mild fall and he didn't need to bring the young stock into the tie-up till the first of November, and it was another two weeks before he brought in the sheep. By that time he had the cellar under the house crowded to capacity; nearly fifty bushels of potatoes, more than a hundred bushels of turnips and carrots—winter succulence for the stock—a dozen barrels of apples and two big molasses barrels full of cider sitting on two low horses between the granite foundation slabs of the central chimney.

The first hard freeze caught him at his final outside chore for the fall—banking the house and ell with a wall of trodden straw two feet high and a foot thick, held in place by boards.

Husking bees, held in the barns of the farms nearer town on the milder nights of October, had widened Temp's and Cora's acquaintance and strengthened friendships already formed. Sitting around a barn floor on piles of hay in the shadowy light of lanterns hung overhead seemed to bring people into a close cozy circle where reserve was lost and they became boys and girls again.

Roly-poly Roger Benton or Aussy Parker or perhaps Henry Locke or stuttering Levi Scott would start the fun with some prank, and then the husking would begin; and while they husked they sang and talked and told stories, breaking off abruptly in a shrieking roaring hurly-burly of facetious comment and laughter whenever a man husked a red ear and tried to kiss every woman there.

Of all the bees that Temp and Cora attended, their own set a high point that few others approached. Temp stepped it up by spreading straw, instead of hay, on the floor. He made a bed of it several inches deep and it was so slippery that people could scarcely stand up on it, let alone run. And there was plenty of running, as Roger Benton came with a number of red ears hidden in his shirt and surreptitiously passed them around.

It was an evening to remember, and its high point came in the hush that followed the husking of the last ear. The huskers were sitting back, relaxed, as they always did at this time, when out of the high dark cavern above their heads came queer squeaky sounds and then a low unearthly groaning. Everybody looked up, startled, and saw a huge, dimly whitish thing float slowly down from that far upper darkness. It flapped great wings and moaned, and then swooped down with a shrill squeaking to hover, flapping, just above the beams.

There were gasps and startled cries from the women, and uncertain laughter from the men. Then Aussy Parker boomed:

"It's on the hay fork!" and threw an ear of corn.

It struck the figure in the middle, and more corn flew.

"Hey, quit it!" came a laughing protest from the ghost.

"It's Rob," Nelly Gregg called out.

"It used t' be, anyhow," Rob Davis answered. "All right, Levi; pull me back clear of this beam, and then you let me down, Henry; this rope's just about cut me in two."

Rob moved back, accompanied by another high squeaking, and then came jerkily down to the floor. "Hey," he said, "somebody help me out o' this sheet."

They got him out of the sheet and untied the rope that ran up to the hay fork carriage, an ingenious device of wheels and pulleys that ran from end to end of the barn on wooden tracks hung just under the ridge pole.

"Kind of risky, wa'n't it?" Lish Morrison remarked.

Rob laughed. "Not with Levi runnin' the carriage and Henry on the end of the rope." He glanced around. "Ain't they come down yet?"

"R-r-ight h-here," Levi answered, and he and Henry came into the light brushing hay from their clothes.

"And all ready fer some pie an' cake an' coffee," Henry chuckled. "How about it, Cory?"

Friendly days and friendly people.

The first sledding snow came just before Thanksgiving, and Temp fixed some barrel-stave runners for Simon's wagon and hauled Simon to the Parkers' in it for Thanksgiving dinner. The Grants were there, and Sarah's father and mother; kindly, raw-boned Doctor Freeman Luce, his hair hanging about his ears in silvery waves, his long black coat thrown open in front, showing his double-breasted lavender vest with the heavy gold watch chain looped across from pocket to pocket; and portly Emma Luce in a lavender taffeta dress that matched the doctor's vest and was so heavy it rustled like dry leaves when she moved, a gracious motherly woman with a tactful sense of humor.

Cora thought she'd never seen Sarah looking prettier. Sarah's eyes were dancing and her cheeks were flushed from the frosty air. She was so full of life and so very pretty that Emma Luce almost took Cora's breath, when she said:

"Well"—and looked from Sarah to Cora—"if I didn't know diff'rent, I'd take you two girls t' be sisters. Just look at 'em, Freem. Did you ever see a prettier pair in all your life?"

Doctor Luce gave her a whimsical look. "That was unkind of you, Emma," he said. "You took the words right out of my mouth—and I hoped they might get me a kiss."

"I think you both deserve one," Cora cried. "A good one," she added, and kissed them soundly.

Marvin so far forgot his shyness as to say, "Ain't I next?" And he went beet-red and looked as if he were going through the floor when Cora laughed and started for him.

"Oh-ho," Sarah said, and flashed a laughing glance at Temp. "I'll have to make up for that." And she danced across the floor and kissed him.

Aussy cleared his throat, and rumbled forlornly, "And I git what a skinny little runt always gits when they're passin' out sweets; and that's nothin'."

"Why, you poor lamb!" Ida cried. "Have pity on him, girls—all he's got t' kiss him is a plain ol' feather bed, tied in the middle."

Sarah and Cora moved on Aussy. "But not for pity," Cora declared.

After a breathless moment, Aussy broke out in a high falsetto, "Whee-e." And then his voice dropped several octaves, and he roared. "Gone t' heaven—gimme room, folks, while I flap my wings!"

When the laughter was over, Doctor Luce said, "Now show me that baby I've heard so much about."

"Come with me, Freem," Ida said.

He took Cora's arm and they followed Ida into Web's bedroom. Simon's eyes were closed when they first went in, but he seemed to sense that somebody was looking at him and he opened them, rolling them from Ida to the doctor to his mother. A slow smile started and went suddenly into a convulsive snicker, as if he'd just heard a joke that tickled him to death.

"Huh," the doctor muttered, and shook his head. "Hercules and Samson—eyah, an' David, all rolled into one." He shook his head again, and said to Cora, "Don't let him get sick—but don't be *too* careful of him."

Before Cora could answer, he turned and said, "Well, Ida, Emma said you was goin' to have something to eat around here t'day."

"Land o' love!" Ida exclaimed. "We been havin' such a time I'd most forgot it." She hurried out.

The doctor stepped to another corner of the room and looked down at his grandson. Then he glanced back at Simon and shook his head. He smiled at Cora and took her arm. "Let's see about that dinner," he suggested.

It was a gay dinner. The only two lapses into seriousness came when the doctor asked the blessing and, later, while the golden-brown turkey was being reduced to a skeleton, when they talked of the Election and the possibility of trouble in the South.

"It's a good thing fer the country," Aussy said, "that Lincoln got elected. If anybuddy kin fix things up down there, he's the man t' do it."

"Eyah. But if any of them states try to leave the Union, they'll

find they've got a fight on their hands," Doctor Luce added prophetically.

Every little while during dinner he looked at the door to the babies' room and his eyes would crinkle at the corners. While the women were putting the dishes away, he led Temp to one side, and said in a low voice:

"Mebby I ain't telling you anything new, but that boy of yours is the finest-looking baby I'd ever hoped to lay eyes on. That grandson of mine is pretty fine, but your boy—well, he's diff'rent, somehow." He smiled and his big fingers tightened on Temp's shoulder.

7

TEMP was still walking on air that Thanksgiving evening when he and Cora took Simon home. He couldn't get over what the doctor had said and it filled him with a strange sort of vicarious pride. It was too late now, without making a lot of talk, to let people know that he wasn't Simon's father; but it couldn't go on like this forever. There was all that money, and one thing that oughtn't to be put off any longer was fixing up the records so the baby could get it.

When Cora returned to the kitchen after putting Simon to bed, Temp said to her, "Well, it looks like I'd have some time on my hands fer a while now, and I figure if I'm a-goin' to Wateegan I better git started before cold weather sets in."

"You mean—about the Bible?"

"Eyah. It's time we got that straightened out."

"But you won't—you won't say anything about it here?"

The guilty feeling, that he was withholding Simon's most rightful claim, came over him again, but it was much less strong than it had been, and he shook his head with scarcely any hesitation.

"No," he said. "We been here a good two months and it's too late to say anything now. But we hadn't ought to put off gettin' the record fixed up any longer."

Cora came over and kissed him. "I'm glad," she said.

They arranged for Cora and Simon to sleep at the Parkers' while Temp was away. He couldn't tell how long he would have to be in Wateegan, but he didn't intend to be gone any longer than he had to and planned to drive the forty miles

down there in one day. It meant an early start even on the snow and he left long before daylight. He had polished the sleigh runners so they would slip along easily and had new sharp-calked shoes put on the mare, and he went jingling out of the dooryard with Aussy's bearskin robe tucked about him and the Bible in his pocket.

They had told Aussy and Ida that he was going to see about some money that Cora was supposed to be heir to, and later that morning when she came over, Ida remarked:

"Well, it looks like he got a good start and I hope he don't have no trouble down there. Money's a mighty nice thing t' come heir to."

She and Sarah Grant and Nelly Gregg spent part of each day with Cora, and twice, Grace Benton drove down from the ridge for the afternoon. They were Cora's best friends; much better, she told herself, than those she'd grown up with had proved to be. They helped her with the small chores and then got out their knitting and sat and talked as their needles clicked over socks and mittens. Every morning and evening Aussy and Marvin came over to do the barn chores and keep the wood boxes full. And every afternoon, as soon as school was out, Web came over to play with Simon.

They were full days, but the first two seemed, to Cora, to drag out endlessly. Then they went quicker, but when Temp returned it seemed much longer than six days that he had been away. It was long past dark and she was sitting in the kitchen with Ida and Aussy when she heard the familiar jingle of bells come faintly along the Falls road. The jingling grew louder and then fainter, and stopped. Cora ran to the window and peered out.

"It must be Temp," she cried. "But what's he stopping for?"

Aussy smiled and got out of his chair. "I cal'late he's been pushin' the mare right along," he said, "and he's stopped t' home t' put her in the barn so she won't git chilled. I'll go bring him over."

Waiting for them seemed almost longer to Cora than all the rest of the time put together. She pulled Temp to her and kissed him there before the others in spite of his embarrassment.

"Ye couldn't of had much trouble, seems as though," Aussy remarked.

"No trouble at all," Temp answered. "Just took time."

Aussy chuckled. "I wouldn't call four days much time t' git that kind of business fixed up."

"Well, I'm glad you're home," Ida said. "Cory's been as restless as a new-weaned kitten, so I hope you got enough t' make it worth your while."

Temp took a deep breath and smiled queerly at Cora. "I got plenty," he said. "And I'm plenty hungry, too, so we better be gittin' on home."

But Ida insisted that he eat before they went home. "I'll get ye a hot supper in no time," she said, "and you can be tellin' us the news."

"Cal'late the' wa'n't much news that ye ain't heard here," Temp said. "About the trouble down South, anyways. The's talk about all them Southern states gittin' out o' the Union and settin' up a gove'mint of their own. But come spring, when Mr. Lincoln gits in, I cal'late he'll tend to 'em right sharp."

Cora could scarcely wait to hear about the record, and she had Simon ready and her coat on by the time Temp had finished eating. And the Parkers' door had no more than closed behind them, when she asked:

"They took it all right—you got it recorded?"

"Eyah. They was right friendly about it. The clerk said he'd saved a place fer it, and it was a load off his mind to git it filled in. What took the time was gittin' the papers an' things fixed up about Hastings' money." An uncertain note came into his voice, as he added, "I—it feels kind of queer to be married to a rich woman."

"Oh," Cora gave an excited laugh. "Was there really very much?"

"Eleven thousand eight hundred and twenty-two dollars," he told her slowly.

Actually coming into possession of such a great deal of money made her feel a little faint. "Oh," she said. "What—what shall we do with so much?"

"Why—it ain't anything fer me to say. It's your money."

"But it's just as much yours, and you——"

"No," he interrupted, still speaking slowly. "It's Hastings' money and I couldn't touch any of it. It's—well, I just ain't livin' off another man's money."

Cora couldn't see his face in the darkness, but she knew from his tone that he would never use a cent of the money. She didn't urge him, but tried to think of some way to get around the difficulty.

When they got home and got the lamp lighted and the fire going and she'd put Simon to bed, she said, "I don't want to leave all that money in the bank, Temp. I want to put it in something, like land—something the children will be sure to get when they grow up."

Temp shook his head. "Not fer my children. Whatever I have'll git just what I kin leave to 'em myself. But you do what you're mind to fer Simon."

"What do you think I'd better do?"

"Why—it's just more money than I want to git mixed up with. The thing fer you to do is talk to Aussy about it; he's handled more money than I ever see."

"But how would it look if I went to him—or to anybody but you?" Cora asked. "Don't you think it would look queer?"

Temp gave her a half-grimacing smile. Then he said, "Mebby you're right." He was thoughtful a few moments. "I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll talk it over with Aussy and see what he thinks would be the best thing to do."

"But what do you think?" Cora persisted. "If it was your own money, what would you do with it?"

Temp looked down his long nose and then slanted his eyes at her. "Well, it come out of timber and I cal'late I'd put it back into timber."

"Then that's just what we'll do!"

"Now you hold on," Temp said uneasily. "That was fer me—if I had the money. But I wouldn't do that if I wanted it fer the children. You wouldn't git much increase if ye bought old-growth timber fer 'em and, anyhow, the most of it's been cut around here. But the's all kind of cut-over land that you'd ought to be able to buy mighty cheap, pickin' out pieces where

the young stuff was comin' in good an' thick and growin' fast enough to be ready to cut in twenty-thirty years. Put ten thousand in that kind of stuff an' save the rest to pay taxes, and Simon would have enough lumber to cut to last him most the rest of his life."

"Why—why, yes," Cora said faintly. "I—I hadn't thought of him in the lumber business. But he wouldn't have to do the lumbering himself, would he? He could sell it, or let somebody else do that, couldn't he?"

"Why, sure," Temp said, a little puzzled. "He could do anything he was a mind to with it."

Cora smiled and nodded. "Then that's what we'll do," she said. And she told herself that she'd see well to it that Simon grew up to be a farmer and not a woodsman; if she did nothing else, she'd make sure that he didn't take after his father.

Temp began to spend his spare time cruising the woods for likely-looking pieces of young black-growth. Sometimes he took Aussy with him, or Otis Wick, who owned the box shop and sawmill, to get their advice. There were plenty of deer in the woods and Temp carried a gun till he had what venison he needed for the winter.

Early in December the Saturday night dances at the town hall began; square dances, that everybody knew how to do, with Aussy or Lish Morrison or Charles Perkins calling the numbers, and Levi Scott, assisted by Otis Wick and Perley Dixon, furnishing the music. Otis played the banjo and Perley a deep-toned guitar, and stuttering Levi could make his fiddle stutter to shame his tongue. Cora and Temp danced with the best through the whirling, stamping, prancing figures, but toward the middle of the winter she had to stop; such violent exercise gave her too much discomfort, and she took things easier as her time approached.

She craved fresh meat, and after Temp had dropped them a hint, all through February and March Henry Locke and Rob Davis brought her rabbits. They liked to hunt the big white snowshoe rabbits and every few days they'd strike out back of the Davises' up the hill and head east down to the Plains. The Plains were some two miles long by half a mile wide, beginning

just back of Temp's wood lot and running south between the hill road and the westerly end of Saddleback Ridge to well beyond Sam Bradbury's. The edges of the Plains and in particular the low land around the end of Saddleback was good rabbit country, and Rob and Henry, with Henry's bell-toned rabbit hound, made a habit of coming home by way of the Thurston place and getting coffee and doughnuts from Cora in exchange for two or three rabbits.

They'd come into the kitchen and tell Cora the latest gossip and pretend not to notice her pregnant condition. The beginning of April put an end to the hunting, as rabbits weren't supposed to be fit to eat after the end of March. It marked the end of winter and that year the first rains came early in April. The snow went off, and Cora's baby arrived the third week in the month, in mud time; a boy, with his father's and mother's black hair and eyes.

Temp couldn't hide his disappointment in his child. "Kind of looks like a little old weezened-up frog, don't he?" he remarked.

Cora had to laugh. "Well, he's surely got your legs," she said. "And I think he'll have your nose, too."

Temp looked down his long nose and shook his head. "It don't hardly seem fair," he muttered, thinking of Simon's lusty perfection.

He wanted to name the baby Washburn, in honor of Maine's governor.

"But they'll call him Wash," Cora protested.

Temp grinned, but his eyes flickered. "Let 'em," he said, "and like enough he'll 'wash' 'em."

Cora knew then that the baby would be christened Washburn. She thought of calling him Burney to forestall the uglier nickname, but it didn't sound too well and she changed it to Bunny, and smiled over it, because bunnies had long legs, too.

Simon was becoming more and more of a problem. He was very large for his age and it distressed Cora to see him on his feet so much. But his sturdy legs showed no signs of bowing and carried him about at an amazing clip. Unless she kept him haltered he was difficult to watch; he was there, and then he wasn't there. He kept her scurrying.

She was bathing Bunny one hot August morning when she heard Simon scream. She very nearly dropped Bunny in her haste to put him down. Then she stood there trembling, uncertain where Simon was. A light thud sounded from the ell, and Simon screamed again, a high-pitched, full-lunged scream, yet with a peculiar note that Cora didn't stop to analyze. She ran through the back entry and milk room to the woodshed, and there, sitting among the chips beside the splitting block, was Simon, his body and chubby arms swaying from the strain of lifting Temp's heavy splitting ax.

His back was toward his mother, and he was so much engrossed that he hadn't heard her. Before she could reach him, the ax came down, directed, blade first. It struck with a light thud between Simon's feet and, once more, he screamed, a piercing battle cry of sheer ecstasy.

Cora snatched him up and swung him to the walkway. With all her strength she drove the ax into the splitting block, tested it and, assured that he could not pull it out, left him there and went back to the kitchen, weak and shaken. Presently she heard other sounds from the woodshed; curious bumping and grunting sounds. She investigated and discovered Simon rolling about with the splitting block, tugging at the ax handle.

His antics, his red-faced grimaces and grunts as he heaved, made her smile, but also left her apprehensive. She recalled how he had handled the ax, as if he knew instinctively how to use it. She hoped it was only a passing fancy, but she took no chances. Every morning she saw to it that the ax was firmly set in the splitting block. Every morning it was Simon's first point of call, and whenever she felt that he'd been silent too long she would slip out there and usually find him sitting on the walkway looking at the ax, or standing beside the block caressing its handle. None of the other tools seemed to interest him, not even knives or the hatchet. Cora was forced to believe that his fascination for the ax was an inheritance from his father. It filled her with foreboding and she wondered if he would inherit his father's fatal taste for whisky.

As her mind ran into the future with him, another problem rose. During the winter and spring Temp had bought some two thousand acres of growthy young timber, mostly pine and fir and

spruce that would be ready to cut for lumber in twenty to thirty years. It was all in her name—Temp wouldn't take any of it; his only concession, in regard to Hastings' money, was to let her buy cattle and sheep to stock the farm fully. There was still almost fourteen hundred dollars left. One thousand of it, at Temp's suggestion, had been loaned to the town at six per cent interest to pay the timber taxes. The interest, alone, Temp had pointed out, would carry the taxes for the next ten or fifteen years and, with the principal, should continue to cover them until the timber was ready to cut. Cora had the rest of the money, some three hundred and eighty dollars, in gold in her bureau drawer. The money itself had little bearing on her problem; but the timber tracts raised a disturbing question.

What would Bunny, and the other children she hoped to have, think when all of that timber went to Simon? How could it be explained without telling them all about her first marriage?

She spoke to Temp about it.

"Only one thing to do," he said. "Tell 'em. It wouldn't be right fer Simon not to know who his father was, and we'd have to tell him, anyhow, even if the' wa'n't no timber."

"But how can we—I mean, without its making talk?"

"Why, I figure if we wait till Simon's twenty-one what talk the' is won't make any diff'rence."

"Of course!" Cora said, and felt great relief. "When he's twenty-one!"

8

IT NEVER occurred to Simon that there was anything remarkable about his companionship with Web. At first he was much too young to appreciate the five years' difference in their ages—he simply took Web's friendship for granted, as he did Cora's and Temp's; and later he'd become so accustomed to it that he never gave it a thought.

From September to June there were few days that Web didn't cut across the tannery dam for the Thurstons' as soon as school let out, and when there was no school he was over there so much that Ida laughingly suggested that he might as well be living there. But his appearance always brought a feeling of relief to Cora. Web was level-headed as well as sturdy, and Simon, she felt, was much safer with him than when running around alone. At the same time she saw that their companionship was making Simon considerably older than his years.

She tried to counteract this by having him play with Freeman Grant. Freem was only a month younger than Simon and was large for his age, himself, but Simon showed little more interest in Freem than he did for his own half brother. The spring after Simon and Freem were three, Freem began coming over to the Thurstons' by himself. He'd stand around shyly, waiting to be included in whatever Simon might be doing, and winding up finally by playing with two-year-old Bunny.

The first interest that Simon ever showed in anybody younger or smaller than himself was in his half sister, Susan. He was two and a half when she was born, a bright elfin little thing, looking as much like her mother as Bunny looked like his father. She seemed to fascinate Simon. He'd lean on her crib

and watch her and look at his mother and grin, but he appeared to forget all about her when Web was there.

She continued to hold his intermittent interest, an attention that Parker failed to share. This last son of Cora's was born in the late fall of '63; dark, like Bunny and Susan, but pudgy. Simon took one look at him and turned away.

"Don't you like him?" Cora asked.

Simon's expression conveyed more than his words.

"He looks like a toad," he said.

Cora looked at him aghast. Temp, she knew, had only been joking when he had likened Bunny to a frog, but Simon hadn't been joking. When he'd gone out, she looked at Parker more closely, and had to admit there was really something toadlike about him. His pudginess had a deep-seated look of permanency and there was an unsavory something about him that made her think of Temp's Uncle Balaam. Fear took hold of her, and she got the better of it only by assuring herself that even Uncle Balaam must have been the victim of circumstances. No child of hers, she told herself, could ever be like that; from that moment she never allowed herself to admit that Parker was another throwback.

One afternoon, soon after she was able to be up and about her work again, Simon came into the kitchen and stood looking at the clock. Cora saw his lips move as if he were counting. Amused, she asked jokingly:

"What time is it?"

He glanced at her and then back at the clock as if for verification, and said unhesitatingly, "It's more than halfway between three and four o'clock."

Cora's eyes went up to the clock and down to Simon. "For goodness' sake," she cried. "How did you learn to tell time?"

He grinned a little and edged toward the door. "Web told me," he said.

"I might have known it," she said, half to herself. "Well, you won't have long to wait for him now."

"I ain't going to wait," he told her. "I'm going over to meet him."

His matter-of-factness made her apprehensive, but she smiled.

"I wouldn't do that," she said. "It's a long way over there."

"It ain't a bit long by the tann'ry dam," he told her. "And I been goin' over all——" he paused, open-mouthed, at her look.

She put her hand on the back of a chair and sat down weakly. She wasn't sure which upset her more, his crossing the tannery dam alone or his having gone without telling her.

"Come here," she said, and he came toward her slowly, wonderingly. When he stood at her knees, she went on, "It's dangerous for little boys to cross the dam alone. It frightens me just to think of your doing it."

"But Web does," he said. "Ida told him he could come over it as soon as it was fixed, and they fixed it; Aussy an' Morrill made a new walkway and put a fence on both sides."

Cora sighed, "Oh, that's different. But, Simon, don't you remember what I said about leaving the place without telling me? You know you promised me that you wouldn't."

"Eyah," he said, "I guess I did. But I——" the corners of his mouth quirked upward in a half-smile that was neither defiant nor stubborn, yet had a little of both.

She took his hands and looked at him earnestly. "A promise isn't that kind of thing," she said. "A man's word is one of the most important things there is. Nobody believes a man who doesn't keep his word. It's as bad as telling lies. Giving your word isn't like taking a drink of water—it's something you think about, first; and, when you've given your promise, you must keep it."

"But what if you forget?" Simon asked.

Cora shook her head. "You mustn't forget. That's part of your promise. The only way anybody can get out of a promise is to—well, like this: when you wanted to cross the dam by yourself you should have come to me and told me it was all fixed up and you wanted me to give you back your word."

"But you was——"

" 'Were,' " Cora corrected.

"You were sick with the baby, then."

"Then you should have waited till I was well enough for you to tell me."

"But I wanted to go then!"

Cora shook her head again. "That's making your promise like a drink of water; something you could spit up if you didn't like it. That's the reason you mustn't make a promise unless you're going to keep it."

"Oh," Simon said. "Then if I tell Bunny and Freem that I'll play with 'em tomorrow, I got to play with 'em tomorrow?"

Cora smothered a smile. "Yes," she said.

"Oh," Simon said again. "Then I guess I'd better not tell 'em."

"Not if you aren't going to."

"Well——" Simon glanced at the clock. "Kin I—I mean, can I go meet Web? I got just about time to get there."

"You'll be careful?"

"Eyah."

"And you'll come right home?"

"Ey——" Simon caught himself and grinned. "Web said he might have to go to the store for something, but I'll come home soon as he does."

Cora smiled. "All right. But don't forget to be careful."

"I'll walk across the dam," he said, and scampered out.

A few days later Aussy hauled a load of starch to the railroad at Fairview, the county seat, for shipment to Portland. The starch being very light for its bulk, he went over Crockett Hill through Jessup's Mills, a nine-mile trip over the hills, as against a twenty-mile trip over the much more level road by way of Brent's Falls. Aussy returned home the same night, bringing with him an Indian pony for Web.

The pony had white legs from the knees down, white mane and tail, pinkish-white hoofs and nose and a dark red body with large white spots like a pair of saddlebags on his sides. Web couldn't wait to tell Simon and he raced to the Thurstons'.

"Hey, Simon!" he cried. "I got a pony—a real Indian pony!"

"Gorry!" Simon said, only mildly interested. "What you goin' to do with him?"

"Why, ride him, and—and drive him! Come on over an' look at 'im!"

"It's about bedtime," Cora remarked. "He'd better wait till morning."

Temp was more interested than Simon and he started for his coat. "I'll go with 'em an' take a look," he said. "We won't be gone long."

"Prettiest thing you ever see," Web declared. "An' gentle as a kitten."

"Mebby ye better wait till you've tried him out," Temp suggested. "I've heard tell these Western hosses are mighty uncertain critters."

"This one ain't. I already been on him and he never s' much as laid back his ears!"

Aussy was waiting for them in the barn with a lantern, and he boomed, "Come in, Temp, an' tell me what ye think of him."

Temp and Simon were both surprised at the pony's size. "Why," Temp said, "he ain't much more'n half as big as an ordinary hoss. How'd ye come to git him?"

Aussy chuckled. "Oh, something fer the boys t' fool round with. A feller from Fairview went out t' Kansas and he brought a carload of these ponies back with him. Sold most of 'em down t' Boston an' Portland, but he brought five home, and I kind of took a fancy t' this one."

Web seemed disappointed at Simon's lack of enthusiasm. "Come on," he urged. "Git on him; he's just the right size for us t' ride t'gether!"

Simon grinned at Web, the sort of a grin a man would give a boy he was trying to humor. He stepped to the pony and caught its mane and, with a boost from Web, went up and astride.

"You—you don't reckon he could ride us into the woods?" he asked doubtfully.

"You just bet he kin," Web assured him. "A pony like him kin go anywheres—the Indians train 'em to it."

Simon's eyes began to sparkle. It was the first enthusiasm he had shown and Web kindled to it. "We'll ride him all over everywheres," Web cried.

The first snow of the season came that same night and put an end to Simon's crossing the tannery dam. But it made little difference, as Web rode the pony to school every day, keeping him in the closed horse shed in back of the town hall. Darkness

came too early for them to do much riding after school but on Saturdays and Sunday mornings they explored.

A little way beyond Temp's east boundary an old road ran back to the Plains. It skirted Temp's wood lot, crossed the Plains and then the hill road beyond Sam Bradbury's, cut through the woods and came out on the meadows of Deadwater Stream just below Arty Coulter's island. Some said it was an old Indian trail, and others said it was the first road put through by the pioneers coming north. At any rate, it made almost a straight line from the Brent's Falls road, running south-southwest toward Plainsboro, the township on the south side of Deadwater Stream.

In the summer the north end of the road was used by berry pickers and to haul out hay, and later, potatoes from the Plains, and both ends were used in the winter to haul logs. It was a brushy road, little more than the trail it might have been in the beginning, but it was much more level than the Hill road and smooth enough for the pony to take on the run.

Web, with Aussy's help, had fashioned a bridle to fit the pony and put light rope reins on it. They had fixed up two old saddle bellybands with rings and cinches and riveted loops on either side for the boys' feet. Web and Simon would spread a heavy blanket on the pony's back, cinch it down, climb aboard and gallop off, leaving behind them a wake of flying snow, thrown from the pony's hoofs.

Simon started riding in front where Web could keep an eye on him in case he lost his balance, and they continued to ride that way, as Web found that by sitting up straight he could just see over the top of Simon's hatless head. They'd take the old road and ride back to the Plains, where they'd wind in and out among the clumps of gray birches and scattered black-growth around the edges.

They weren't permitted to go beyond the Plains but they were out there nearly every week end until the snow became too deep for the pony. In March, when farmers and villagers began to cut and haul their firewood for next winter, the old road was broken clear through to the meadows on Deadwater Stream, and the boys made their first trip the entire length of it. From the meadows they could see Arty Coulter's shack on the island a

short distance upstream. Smoke was rising in a pale blue haze from the low stone chimney, and Web said:

"Looks like Arty's t' home. Let's go see him."

"Eyah," Simon said. Arty lived in the woods, spending his time lumbering or trapping, at whichever he could make the most money; and anything connected with the woods interested Simon. He gave the pony a kick.

The stream's main channel ran to the south of the island. The north channel was shallower and sometimes ran dry but even with the snow that had drifted between them, the banks were too deep and steep for the pony. They rode along the bank in the path that Arty had made to his trap lines downstream. Grass was showing through in the path, although the snow was still two feet deep on either side. The island was small, containing less than half an acre, and about twice as long as its width. Toward the middle Arty had made a bridge by tipping three pine trees across the north channel.

The boys tied the pony, crossed the bare logs and followed the path through bushes and trees to the shack. The door opened and Arty poked out a tousled head and whiskery face and stared. Then he laughed.

"Well, I be dang!" he said. "How'd you fellers git here?"

"Down the old road," Web told him, pointing. "On the pony. You got any skins left?"

Arty laughed. "What ye reckon them are?" He pointed to a frame with horizontal poles, and from the poles hung pelts, wrong side out, on stretcher boards. "Ye want t' buy some?" Arty asked.

"Oh, gorry, look at 'em, Simon!" Web exclaimed. "No, we didn't figure t' buy any; we just wanted t' see 'em. What kind are they?"

"Well, them black ones is marten, the brown ones is mink, and them with the long tails is otter. You tell the color by the tails," he added.

"Got any bobcat or foxes 'r coons?" Web asked.

Arty shook his head. "Ain't worth nothin'—ain't ary of 'em worth much these days. Looks like the war's used up all the money."

Web looked as if he wanted to say something but wasn't sure that he should, and Arty said, "What's on your mind?"

"Why—I was just thinkin' that anybuddy that liked t' hunt around an' shoot like you do would kind of like to git into the war."

Arty grunted. Then he drew himself up to his stocky, less-than-average height, and his eyes twinkled. "Mebby I will," he said. "Cal'late I'd be down there now a-shootin' me some Johnnies, if folks had knowed enough t' leave a feller alone and not go tryin' t' push him into it."

His jaw took a square set and the twinkle in his eyes lost its warmth. "Some folks just don't know when t' keep their dang mouths shut," he said. He laughed suddenly. "Looks like I was kind of runnin' t' tongue myself. Now, this feller," he glanced at Simon, "he ain't said a word." A quizzical look came into his eyes. They went from one boy to the other and came to rest on Simon.

"Gorry, if you ain't the growin'est young'un I ever see," Arty chuckled. "You're most as big as Web right now an' I bet the' ain't five pounds diff'rence in what ye weigh."

The faint jingle of bells came from downstream, and Web said, "I guess we better get goin'; there comes Ote for his last load and I told Pa we'd come out ahead of him."

"Now that's too bad," Arty said. "I was figurin' t' take ye up t' look at some traps. Sure ye got t' go?"

Web glanced at Simon, but Simon shook his head. "You told Aussy we'd come out ahead of Ote," he said.

"Well, come agin when ye kin," Arty said. "The' ain't many gits out this way and I'll be glad t' see ye."

"You bet we will," Simon said. "If we can."

9

THE war had seemed very far away until word came that Charles Foster had been killed. This brought the war home to Council Rock. It sobered people and put a glint in the young men's eyes. Henry Locke and Rob Davis went down to Augusta to enlist. A week later they came home, disgusted.

"Seems as though," Henry said at the store that night, "this feller Stanton don't know where he's at. One day, he's a-roarin' fer soldiers, an' the next, he don't want 'em. What kind of a way is that t' run a war?"

Temp and Aussy were there, as well as others who had come to get the news, and Aussy said:

"Did they say why they wouldn't let ye inlist?"

Lish Morrison's chin whisker took an aggressive angle. "Not a word! Kind of looks like they don't think our boys is good enough fer soldiers."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Nathan Gregg protested. "They just told 'em to come home an' they'd send fer 'em when they was ready."

"Ready!" Lish barked. "The way them Johnnies is shovin' us around, we'd ought t' have every soldier we kin git down there, right now!"

"Well," Temp said, "seems as though it might be a right sizable chore just to feed a mess of soldiers, to say nothin' of gittin' guns an' uniforms fer 'em. Ain't much use havin' soldiers without they got things to fight with."

Aussy Parker rumbled deeply, "Looks like ye'd hit it, Temp. It's bound t' take time t' furnish up a lot of soldiers, but when

they're ready they'll likely come down on us fer every man we got."

"They better git a move on 'em then," Lish declared.

Henry and Rob swore they were all through with the army; that Stanton or even Lincoln himself could never get them to take another step toward the war. But when the Draft Act came, they headed a dozen other young men to the rendezvous at Augusta; it shouldn't be said that the Draft had to be enforced to make Council Rock furnish its quota.

They marched off in a group, Rob Davis never to return, and Henry Locke to lose an arm. Henry was the first of the group to come home. He drove in with Perley Dixon on the mail stage late one afternoon in the spring of '64.

It was a warm afternoon and Simon had intended to meet Web at the school and go off for a ride in the woods on the pony; but Temp was driving Cora and the other children to the store and Simon had to go along to keep an eye on his half brother and sister while Temp and Cora were inside. Cora held six-months-old Parker on her lap, and Simon and Bunny and Susan rode on the wagon floor behind. Bunny and Susan sat on a blanket and Simon stood, holding to the back of the seat. Bunny watched him till they were out of the dooryard and then started to get up himself.

Simon pushed him back. "Sit down," he ordered.

"You stand up—I stand up," Bunny retorted, and started again to rise.

Simon's hand dropped on his shoulder and sat him down, hard. "When you're as big as me, you can ride standing up," he said.

Cora glanced over her shoulder at Simon. "You'd better sit down, too," she told him.

Bunny's glare changed to a grin as Simon sat down. Simon gave him a disgusted look, and whispered, "You talk too much!"

Bunny made no attempt at an answer but his black eyes were bright with defiance. Still looking at Simon, he gave Susan a provocative push. It unbalanced her and she rolled over and bumped her head before Simon could catch her. He straightened her up and held her a moment.

"Don't you mind," he said, and gave her head a little rub. All at once his hand shot out and fastened on Bunny's arm. Bunny tried to squirm free but went over backward with a snap that whacked his head on the floor.

"That's what you get," Simon said, "for tryin' to stand up!"

Temp looked around. "Washburn," he said. "Ye heard what your ma said, didn't ye?"

Bunny sat up and held his head. He didn't say a word, but his eyes burned at Simon.

"Stay where ye be, now," Temp said to him, and faced around again.

Temp tied the mare at the store hitch-rail and he and Cora went in. Simon sat Susan across the wagon bed from Bunny and stood up between them. Bunny gave him a smoky look and then turned toward the blacksmith shop where Russ Graham was finishing the shoeing of a horse in the light of the wide front door. Russ had the horse's near hind leg across his leather-aproned knee, holding a clinching iron to the nail points as he hammered them home and then twisted off the points with the hammer claw. He eased the horse's foot to the floor, moved a wide-based, narrow-topped hardwood block under the horse's flank, set the horse's foot on it and began to smooth and shape the hoof to fit the new shoe.

Simon divided his time between Bunny and Susan, the blacksmith shop and looking up the road. It was about time for school to let out, and presently he saw Web coming, galloping down the road on his pony. Web pulled in beside the wagon and gave Simon a wry grin.

"You got t' stay here?" he asked.

"Eyah, till Ma comes out."

"How long'll she be?"

Simon shook his head. "Hey, how about givin' Susan a ride while we're waitin'."

"Sure," Web told him.

"I wanta ride," Bunny put in.

"Aw-w, you," Simon said. "You're always——"

"Oh, gorry," Web exclaimed. "Look! Ain't that a soldier with Perley?"

The stage was making the turn down toward the bridge when Simon looked, and he forgot all about giving Susan a ride. The others forgot it, too. Russ Graham looked out the door of the blacksmith shop and then hurried across to the store.

"Perley's bringin' a soldier," he called through the door, and everybody came out.

"'Y gorry," Lish Morrison ejaculated, "if it don't look like Henry Locke!"

Russ Graham peered. "No," he said. "Henry never looked like that."

The stage came on down across the bridge, the horses slowed and came to a stop in front of the store. The people of the platform looked at the soldier in silence. Then Henry Locke said:

"Don't ye know me?"

There was a sound of pent-up breath escaping, and Lish cleared his throat and said, "Why—why, sure, Henry. I—ye kind of took us by surprise. Ye look s' kind of peaked and——" His voice trailed off to nothing.

Everybody's eyes were on Henry's left sleeve, folded up from the elbow and pinned to his shoulder. Temp handed Parker to Cora and went out to the stage and held out his hand.

"Henry," he said, "I'm glad—we're all glad—to see ye. But not like this. I cal'late the North owes ye more than it kin ever pay."

Henry's slow smile seemed only to accentuate the gray gauntness of his face. His eyes seemed to have crawled back in their sockets. Their once bright look of pukish mischief was gone, replaced by dull shadows; and his voice had none of its old rollicking exuberance, when he said:

"Well, I got home, anyhow, and that's more than a lot of 'em kin say." He took Temp's hand and got down from the stage and shook hands with the others as they crowded about him.

"We didn't even know ye was hurt," Russ Graham said.

Henry's eyes flicked toward his pinned-up sleeve. "No, I figured Ma and Pa might worry too much, and I was comin' home soon, anyhow. But it ain't s' bad—it's only half gone, and I'll make a go of it all right."

Emory Davenport had come down from his wagon shop, and

now he asked solicitously, "How'd ye come t' lose it, Henry?"

"Minnie ball. Got me in the elbow." Henry's lips drew back against his teeth in a smile. "Well, I cal'late I better git along home an' see the folks," he said, and started back up the hill.

Nobody spoke as he turned away and walked across the bridge. Then Simon whispered to Web, "What did he do with his arm?"

"Dang if I know," Web answered. "Just sawed it off an' throwed it away, I reckon."

"But what for?"

"Why, a minnie ball took him in the elbow—wa'n't no use tryin' t' keep it."

"Oh," Simon said, but his face puckered in perplexity. Then, "What's a minnie ball?" he asked.

"Slug from a muskit," Web told him.

Simon looked profoundly stirred. "Gorry," he said in a queer voice, and turned to his mother who was getting into the wagon. "How's he goin' to swing his ax?"

"Sh-h-h," Cora said.

"But how can he?" Simon persisted.

"He'll just have to do the best he can with one hand," she told him.

Simon looked up the road toward Henry and felt the greatest distress he had ever known. It seemed to him that the end of the world had come for a man who didn't have two good arms to swing an ax.

Henry's home-coming gave the village firsthand knowledge of what war can do to a man. And his experiences, told in his strangely dispassionate voice, turned the whole town against the war.

"We had kind of a mean time," Henry said at the store a few days later. "They sent us down t' Washin'ton and we went into camp acrost the river—on a hill where Gen'ral Robert E. Lee used t' live. We'd hardly got our tents pitched when we was ordered upriver. Fast. We didn't have time to take nothin' along. Only our guns. No beddin', no tents, no grub t' mention. But we didn't care—then. We just didn't know no better." Henry's lips stiffened a little, and his eyes glinted briefly.

"But we come to. Marchin' all day in the rain and lyin' out all night with nothing under you or over you but cornstalks. They stuck us down in a mud hole fer I dunno how long. I never knowed the' was so many lice an' ticks in the world. The whole reg'ment was lousy. Ye couldn't git rid o' the sons-o'-bitches. Them an' the weather an' the slops we had t' eat come closer t' finishin' us than the fightin'. About every other man was dog-sick. And I'm tellin' ye it was cold. I never see nothin' like it. It run right through ye an' made your bones ache, an' that was only October.

"Then they moved us on. But nobuddy cared much. Seemed as though we marched fer a month in the rain, an' slep' in the woods. A good part the time we didn't have no fires. I dunno how we stood it. We hit a place called Warrin'ton and went into camp agin. Somehow 'r other our baggage caught up with us an' they give out overcoats an' shoes an' socks. We was just about gittin' t' feel warm when they moved us on agin. We had t' go in a hurry, an' some o' the boys s' sick they could hardly walk. This time it was Fred'ricksburg. We had more'n a skirmish there. And if the Johnnies got it anything like we did, they must of been mighty bad off. Around four hundred an' fifty in the reg'ment when we left Warrin'ton, and when we got through at Fred'ricksburg the' wa'n't half that many answered roll call.

"That was where Rob got his; through the shoulder. If he hadn't of been two-thirds sick he'd of come through. But the sap had mostly run out of him."

A damp, haunted look came into Henry's eyes, and his jaw set hard.

Aussy was at the store, and told Temp about it, concluding: "Kind of looks like we ain't got many gen'rals that know how t' run a war."

"Eyah," Temp said. "It looks bad. But I cal'late we got t' see it through."

That was the beginning of the second reaction in the village toward the war: it was a terrible thing, but it had to be finished; it would mean the end of the nation, the end of a great Republic, unless the states all stood together.

All that spring there were rumors of another Draft, but it didn't come, and the war again took second place to local affairs. Haying started the first week in July, and continued fine weather kept the countryside in a cheerful mood. Simon and Web had gardens to hoe as well as potatoes and corn. This kept them busy most of their mornings but in the afternoons they were off in the woods. Temp had given them permission to build a log cabin, using rotten-butted firs small enough for them to handle, and they spent the greater part of their afternoons there, chopping and lugging and fitting the logs. But they gave the pony his daily exercise, sometimes around the Plains, sometimes deeper in the woods exploring old logging roads, and occasionally down the wood road to Arty Coulter's.

While Simon hadn't caught up to Web in height, he had passed him in strength and endurance. He was wide and thick; he looked and spoke more like a very lusty seven-year-old than a boy of barely four and a half. He could handle larger logs and work longer, and he'd race through his morning's hoeing and go over and help Web finish his.

One morning just after the middle of the month he was coming in with his hoe to get a drink and go on over to help Web. The Parkers' garden was in their hayfield next to the house, and Simon slanted toward the road to see how far Web had got along. He hadn't got near enough to the road to see Web when he saw something else that stopped him in his tracks: a man, hurrying from the front of the house, a great bear of a man who crossed the road and took the path through the Parkers' hayfield at a rapid rolling walk.

The man was Ed Dow, old Morrill Dow's son, who had come home last winter after his father's death to take charge of the tannery. From the moment he'd first seen him, Simon hadn't liked him; he didn't like his horse teeth or his swaggering walk or the overbearing look in his eyes. And when he overheard talk about Dow, he liked him even less. He hadn't understood the talk, but it was something about women, and Simon ran for the milk-room door to see if his mother was all right.

As he passed the kitchen windows, he heard Ida Parker cry, "Why—why, Cory, whatever's the matter?"

"Oh, Ida." Cora's voice sounded very tired and as if she were going to cry. "I'm so glad you came—I'm so glad you came!"

Simon stood there listening. His throat felt dry and he swallowed.

"What is it?" Ida asked anxiously. "You startin' another heart spell?"

"No, I—oh, I just don't know what to do! It's——"

"You poor child," Ida said. "You been stayin' inside too much. Hot weather like this you should ought t' be outdoors every minute you could. You get your knitting and I'll lug out the chairs and we'll mighty soon get you cheered up again. Land o' love, after havin' four babies I should think you'd know what the matter was when you're three months along with another."

"It isn't that," Cora said. "It's—it's Ed Dow."

"Him? Why the—we'll tend t' him mighty quick! We run him out of town once and we'll do it again!"

"Oh, I wish we could. But I'm afraid! Temp knows he's been here—he said last night that it didn't look very good for Dow to be coming here so much, and I was afraid to tell him how Dow frightened me. I knew if I did, there'd be a fight and he'd get badly hurt, and I'd rather have him think that I don't mind having Dow come to see me."

"The critter!" Ida ejaculated. "How long's he been comin' here?"

"Just this week—while Temp's been haying up at the Lockes'. I saw him looking at me in church, Sunday, and he came over Monday. I told him he mustn't come any more and he just laughed. He said if I told Temp, he'd break him up in pieces. And he would, Ida; he's so much bigger and stronger than Temp, and he doesn't seem to care what he does!"

Ida let her breath go with a quick hissing sound. "You leave me tend to him. He come foolin' around me afore I got fat, an' I cooled him off with a panful o' dirty dishwater. I'd just as soon take a club to him."

"No," Cora said. "Temp would hear about anything like that and he'd go after Dow himself. I can't bear to have him hurt; but I can't bear to have him think that I like to have Dow

come to see me. I don't know what to do, but we'll have to find some way to keep Dow from coming here."

"Well——" Ida paused. "Did he go because he see me comin'?"

"Yes. He—he went out the front way when he saw you coming. He was—he looked——"

Ida became suddenly matter-of-fact. "Don't ye worry about him any more; I'll come over every day while Temp's off hayin', and I'll stay till he comes home. And if Ed shows up," she laughed grimly, "I'll meet him at the door with the ax, an' I don't cal'late he'll stay long—'r come back very soon!"

Simon had gone to the farther kitchen window where he could see in by standing on his tiptoes. He saw Ida pick up a rocker and start with it through the back entry. His mother got her knitting and followed Ida. He waited until they had gone outside and then went into the milk room and hung up his hoe. He remembered that he was thirsty and went on to the kitchen and pumped himself a drink. Before he'd finished drinking, Ida came in.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "You just come in?"

He nodded, and Ida smiled.

"You're goin' t' have comp'ny for dinner while you' pa's away," she said. "Me an' Web, if you'll run over an' tell him."

Simon nodded again. He felt queer inside and stammered a little when he answered. "Eyah," he said. "I was—j-just goin' over."

On his way to the Parkers' Simon wondered whether he'd better tell Web about Ed Dow and his mother. His hands were knotted in a fighting clinch, but his perplexity was as great as his anger. He knew that everybody liked his mother, liked her company, which made Dow's visits to her understandable; but he couldn't understand how Dow could do anything that would frighten her.

Web would likely understand, and Simon decided to find out about it, but when he started to tell Web, he found that he couldn't.

"What's the matter?" Web asked. "You look like you got a bellyache."

Simon shook his head and, for the first time in his life, dissembled. "Kind of hot," he said. "And I was thinkin' we might—well——"

Web gave him a sharp look. "You been workin' too hard. You ought t' take it easy an' rest some."

"Aw-w, I'm all right. I only—oh, say, you're comin' over to our house to dinner today." Simon grinned a little. "Come on, let's get this garden hoed."

To show that he wasn't tired, he set a pace that made Web pant. And that afternoon in the woods he worked as if he hadn't done a thing all morning.

"Gorry," Web said around four o'clock. "I've got about all I want for t'day. Let's go out where we can git some air—the' ain't a might o' breeze in here."

Simon grinned and shook the perspiration from his eyes. He stood back and looked the cabin over, admiringly. "Time we get the door hung an' the windows in, it'll look 'most as good as Arty's, won't it?"

"Eyah," Web agreed.

They put axes and cross-cut saw and adz and chisel and mallet inside, putting them well back under the balsam-covered roof in case of rain. Then they climbed on the pony and rode home. Their mothers were in the dooryard, sitting in the shade of the elm, knitting, and Susan and Parker were asleep on a piece of tarpaulin beside them.

"How's the cabin comin'?" Ida asked.

"Good," Web said. "But it was kind of hot in the woods."

He tied the pony to the hitching post and went in with Simon for a drink. They were lying on the grass when Simon heard his mother catch her breath. She was looking toward the tannery and he turned that way in time to catch a glimpse of a man crossing the dam. Presently Aussy and Temp appeared up the bank, and Simon heard his mother sigh. She was smiling and red spots were growing in her cheeks when he looked around at her, but her hands, he noticed, were trembling.

He suddenly felt excited, himself, and he wondered if Temp and Aussy had been paying a visit to Ed Dow. He watched them come up the path through Aussy's hayfield and on across the road to the dooryard.

Then Ida called out, "Where you been? I thought ye was hayin' up t' Lockes'."

"All through," Aussy boomed back at her. "Finished half an hour or so ago, but we busted our jug and come by the store t' git a new one." He elevated the jug on a bony forefinger and winked at his wife and disappeared down the cellar bulkhead.

Temp waggled his shoulders, freeing them momentarily from the sweat-stained shirt that clung like a plaster. He took off his hat and brushed at the chaff that still clung to his neck. Cora helped him, running her hand down under his shirt.

"It's clear down your back," she told him. "You ought to button your collar when you're putting away in the mow. I wish you didn't have to hay when it's so hot. Are you going up to the Bentons' tomorrow?"

Temp straightened up. "No—by rights we should, but I wanted to git that new stand in the south field under cover while this weather holds, and Roger said to come ahead and we could start on his next Monday."

"Then you're coming here tomorrow?" Cora asked.

"Eyah," Temp answered, and Simon had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach as Temp and his mother looked at each other.

Ida had gone in the house for some tumblers and now she reappeared with them. A moment later Aussy came up from the cellar with the damply glistening jug. He winked at Temp and clicked his tongue.

"I dunno what I'd do," he declared, "without this here cider of yours."

He was filling the tumblers when the mail stage came along the road, and Perley Dixon surprised them by turning in. Perley looked grave. He barely nodded to their greetings.

"I got a Gove'mint letter fer the town, Aussy," he said. "It's just like the one that come t' the Falls, an' that was another Draft call."

"Draft?" Ida said sharply, and Cora caught her breath.

Temp and Aussy looked at each other, and Simon, watching them all, wondered what there was about a Draft that could startle people so. Even Web was startled, and Simon whispered to him:

"What is it?"

Web's eyes slanted at him and then went back to his father. "Why, it's the Draft," he said. "The call for more soldiers, and Pa an' Temp'll have t' draw—like they all done last time, don't you remember?"

Simon had only a hazy recollection of it and he shook his head.

"Well, they got t' draw," Web told him. "All the men that's in the age, and them that gits the crosses'll have t' go t' the war."

That funny feeling worried at Simon's stomach and put a pucker in his face. "Like—like Henry?" he asked.

"Eyah," Web said, and his own face pinched up a little.

10

THE letter proved to be a Draft notice, calling for half a million additional men, and Aussy Parker, the town's first-selectman, set the following Saturday for a special town meeting to consider the call and act upon it. But it seemed a foregone conclusion as to what would be done, and Friday night when Aussy and Temp returned from the store, Aussy summed up the general feeling.

"I cal'late," he said, "we'll vote and hold our drawin's and send our men right off—same as we done last time. The' ain't a town in the state that's got a better record than we have, and nobuddy's a-goin' t' say that we ever hung back. If our country needs us, we're a-goin' right off—if it takes every man we got!"

Those few days were a continuous nightmare to Cora. The fear that Temp would be drawn, and that Ed Dow wouldn't, drove her almost frantic. And even if both of them were drawn, she didn't know what she would do. Already she could see Temp in a blue uniform, marching in a far-off haze, beyond reach, beyond call. There was nothing, now, if he were drawn, that could be done to keep him at home. But it hadn't always been that way.

At least, that had been her first thought when the Draft Act was passed. It had a clause that allowed a man to buy exemption from the army by paying the Government three hundred dollars; and she had more than that much in her bureau drawer. But scarcely two weeks ago word had come that the exemption clause had been repealed. And for all the advantage that Temp would take of it, the permission to hire a substitute might just as well have been withdrawn. He was as strongly opposed to it as he was to buying exemption. She discovered that at the first Draft call

when they learned that men were buying their way out of the army. The scorn in Temp's eyes was more effective than words.

When Cora awoke on Saturday morning it was just getting light, but Temp's side of the bed was already empty. She pulled his pillow to her and buried her face in it. But the tears wouldn't come. She felt all dried out, and so tired. A stifled feeling took hold of her and she turned her face toward the window. Her eyes went out to the great elm in the dooryard. The leaves in its top were bright where the rising sun reached it over the barn. It looked so peaceful, yet there wasn't any peace.

A puff of air came through the window. Somewhere out back a door creaked and then she heard the faint swish of a saw blade and the rasp of splinters, and knew that Temp was in the woodshed bucking up slabs that he'd hauled from the sawmill. Next came the clip of his ax as he split the larger pieces to firebox size; and presently his step on the kitchen floor, the clatter of an armful of slabs in the wood box, the sharper clatter of a stove lid, just a trace of sweetly pungent pine smoke and then his departing steps barnward. She heard the mare nicker. A cow lowed softly and other cattle took it up and started the fatting pigs to squealing in the pens out back of the barn. Feeding time. Cora wondered how many more mornings she would hear all these things and know just what Temp was doing.

Bare feet patted by her door; Simon going out to help with the chores. Cora's chin quivered.

Voices came to her from the children's room and she got up and dressed and went to the kitchen and bathed her face in cold water at the sink. She put more pine slabs in the stove, measured coffee and water in the wide-bottomed coffeepot and set it on to boil. She put a pan of cold biscuits in the oven to warm. Then she went to the pantry and lifted the trap to the cold box and set out butter and eggs and a lean slab of home-smoked bacon.

Temp was milking three cows and two heifers, and when she heard him come into the milk room with his second set of pails she put on the bacon. He looked gaunt and tired when he came into the kitchen. Cora wanted to run to him and feel his arms about her, but she had to keep hold of herself before the children. Every little while during breakfast she felt his eyes on her.

But she didn't meet them; she was afraid if she did she would go to pieces. She felt relieved, in a way, when the men arrived to finish putting in the hay. She could see them down in Temp's south field, shaking out the bunches for the sun to dry out the dew.

Ida came in before nine. She looked at Cora and shook her head. "You don't look like you'd slep' a wink last night," she said. "I cal'late it's a good thing it'll all be over this afternoon."

"I wish that was so," Cora said.

"You worry too much," Ida told her. "The's only one chance in eight that Temp'll get drawed. Or Aussy either. The's twenty-four men that's inside the age, and only three of 'em t' go. Why," she laughed, "if it was a raffle I'd say that wa'n't any chance at all—not with Aussy an' Temp a-drawin'; I never see either of 'em draw anything but blanks!"

Ida laughed again, but it hadn't its usual carefree ring and she seemed to be talking to reassure herself as well as Cora. Sarah Grant came over with Freem. She walked slowly, carefully, as her second baby was due in a month. Then Grace Benton drove in with Nelly Gregg and fourteen-year-old Alice Gregg. While the women got the dinner their husbands were pulling the dry hay together and loading it on Temp's big hay rack, and Simon and Web followed the wagon, raking up the scatterings.

Nelly went to the window and looked across the fields. "Well, I'm glad our hay's all in," she said. "If Nathan gets drawed I won't have that to worry about."

"I'm not worrying about hay!" Sarah told her feelingly.

"What I want t' know," Grace Benton said, "is why there ain't some way of pryin' Arty Coulter off his island. There's a man ought t' be made t' go!"

"Well," Ida said, "I cal'late if folks hadn't of jumped him when he didn't vol'nteer at the start, he'd be in the army now. Arty's like some other folks I know—you push 'em any and they'll haul back till they bust their breechin's. And it's too bad; Arty'd make a right good soldier."

Sarah Grant leaned forward. "And there's another man I'd like even better t' see in the army. But they won't get *him* into it, either. He was sittin' on the store steps when we come home

from Pa's last night, and he was full of cider, singin'! Marvin asked him if he wan't afraid he'd get drawed, and he said the Draft didn't worry him at all—said the army'd never get him because, even if he did get drawed, he'd hire him a substitute!"

Nelly Gregg laughed; a short laugh. "The's only one man I know would do a thing like that, and that's Ed Dow."

Cora's hands went to her breast. She lowered them quickly, hoping nobody had noticed. Then Sarah said:

"Well, it was Ed Dow, and I'd like t' know who he thinks he can hire!"

"He won't hire nobuddy," Ida declared. "The' ain't a man in the town would take that kind of money from nobuddy, let alone Ed Dow. And—" she smiled with grim satisfaction—"Aussy says if you hire a substitute now, you got t' hire him from your own town!"

Sarah laughed. "I hope that's so, and that Ed gets drawn. But he won't. A man like him has too much luck."

The hay crew came in a little before noon, ate in silence, hurriedly, and the men hurried home to clean up and change their clothes. Simon and Web went with them and got the pony and rode around to the town hall to see what they could of whatever went on.

Temp got dressed and came into the kitchen ready to leave. He looked as if he wanted to say something to Cora, but the women were still there and he merely nodded and hurried out. But what Cora saw in his eyes more than made up for anything he might have said.

"Good luck!" she cried after him. "Good luck!"

He turned and gave her a quick smile and hurried out the door.

Cora could scarcely see the dishes she was putting away as the others washed and wiped them. When the kitchen work was done, they carried chairs out to the dooryard where Alice Gregg was looking after Susan and Parker. Bunny and Freem were looking across at the town hall, and Bunny came up to Cora, and said:

"Ma, Freem and me want to go over to the hall."

Cora shook her head.

"But Simon and Web went," Bunny told her. "We see 'em."

Cora sighed. "Maybe they did. But they're older than you and Freem."

"Simon ain't. Freem's just as old as he is!"

"But Simon's bigger; and Web looks after him."

Bunny's eyes burned. "Well, why don't he look after us sometimes?"

"Hush," Cora told him.

Teams and wagons and horsemen converged on the town hall from all three roads, until the village could scarcely be seen for the dust. Cora watched them, and suddenly felt that she couldn't stay at home any longer. She had to go over there herself. She stood up, and said:

"I'm going over there. They're our men, and we've got a right to be with them when they draw."

Her four friends stared at her.

"You—you mean—go inside?" Ida stammered.

"Yes. All of us."

Ida shook her head uncertainly, and Grace and Nelly broke out together:

"But the men—what'll the men say?"

"I don't care what they say. We've got a right to be there."

"And I'll go with you," Sarah cried. She rose, and gave a little cry, half wail, half laugh. "Oh, dear, I forgot. Maybe I'd better stay with the children."

"No, I'll look after them," Alice Gregg said. "You go ahead; all of you—they wouldn't let me in, anyhow."

Ida and Grace and Nelly looked at one another, and Ida said dubiously, "Well, we kin try it."

Cora started for the road and the others followed her. They went down through Aussy's hayfield and across the tannery dam, walking slowly because of Sarah. From the other end of the dam another path sloped up to the Crockett Hill road. Dust still hung in the air when they reached it, but the road was empty. The long shed was full of horses and others were tied to the wagons that stood in ranks in the town-hall yard. Women and children sat in the grass; women from the village and women who had

driven in from outlying farms with their husbands. Some of them watched the hall with fixed attention and others talked in low voices. Even the children were quiet.

Cora stopped in the middle of the yard, and said in a clear voice:

"We're going in."

Many looked at her uncertainly, but others brightened and got to their feet at once. Cora walked on to the small porch. Ida opened the door and looked at her. Cora went in, and then Ida and Sarah and Nelly and Grace, and the others filed in after them.

11

SIMON and Web stood on a board they had blocked up under an open window on the farther side of the hall. Their chins rested on the window sill and they could see and hear everything that went on inside. They hadn't seen their mothers arrive and they watched with open mouths when Cora and Ida led the women into the hall.

The town clerk was reading an announcement and every man in the hall turned to stare at this strange interruption. Some of them whispered together but they did nothing further about it. And when the women had taken seats in the rear, they turned once more to the clerk.

Some seventy men sat facing the platform where the three selectmen stood behind the clerk; and now there were almost as many women as men in the hall. The clerk turned to the selectmen. They were talking together in low voices. Then Aussy Parker nodded and said something, and the clerk faced the hall again.

"I cal'late we all know what we're here for," he said. "Motions are in order for moderator."

"Gorry!" Web whispered. "They're goin' t' let 'em stay!"

Simon nodded. "Eyah," he answered breathlessly. He looked at his mother. She was smiling and glancing at Ida, and his eyes swung back to Temp who sat between Nathan Gregg and Roger Benton.

Nathan rose. "I nominate Aussy Parker," he said.

Half a dozen voices seconded the nomination, and Lish Morrison said:

"I move the clerk be app'inted t' cast one ballot fer Aussy."

This was seconded and approved and the clerk wrote out the ballot and dropped it in the box. He took his chair and Aussy came to the table beside him.

"The Draft Act," Aussy said, "provides that quotas that ain't filled inside of fifty days will have t' be filled by conscription. Our quota is three. That's all they kin call on us fer.

"Now the question before the town is: do we want the State or the Gove'mint down t' Washington comin' in here, runnin' our business fer us and costin' us money, or do we still figure we kin run this town ourselves. Are ye ready fer the question?"

The question was approved and it was moved and seconded that the town do its own drawing for the Draft, and do it now.

"All in favor——" Aussy paused attentively.

A rumble of "Ayes" filled the hall.

"All opposed——" Aussy waited but nobody spoke.

"It's a vote," he said, and the rap of his gavel rang out sharply.

A shaggy-faced farmer stood up and was recognized. "Afore we start the drawin'," he said, "I'd like t' find out if the stream being dry this side of Arty Coulter's makes ary diff'rence about him?"

"We been into that along of the rest of it," Aussy told him, "and Judge Hendricks says it would make a diff'rence. But the trouble is, that north channel won't stay dry—not long enough fer us t' git anywheres. Arty's got his rights, and I dunno as I blame him fer being stubborn about it."

"Well, it don't seem right," the farmer said. "When a feller's young an' strong an' got nobuddy but hisself t' look after, seems as though the' ought t' be some way of gittin' him into the army."

"Scare him into it," Ed Dow said. He didn't bother to rise. "Arty ain't got the money t' go t' law."

A woman hissed, and several others took it up. Dow looked back at them, a vindictive twist on his heavy face and his eyes like bullet holes plugged with glass.

Aussy rapped for order. Then he said, "I want everbuddy here t' know that the seelectmen of this town and the seelectmen of Plainsboro have petitioned t' git the line changed, an' done everything else the law allows t' try t' git Arty into one town or

the other. But scaring folks into doin' something don't come under any law." He looked at Ed Dow. "So I cal'late the' ain't any quick way of gittin' Arty into the army."

Ed Dow's big body came swaying upright. "Oh, yes, the' is," he said. "You kin still hire a substitute. An' the stream bein' dry this side the island, why can't the town hire him an' leave only two men t' be drawed?"

"You want t' make that a motion?" Aussy asked.

"Eyah," Dow snapped. "I'll make it a motion. I move the town votes the money t' hire Arty Coulter into the army!"

Aussy looked about the hall. "Anybuddy second the motion?"

Men glanced at each other, but remained silent. A titter spread through the ranks of women, and Dow glared at them and sat down.

"Motion's killed," Aussy said, rapping the table. "Any more business?"

A tall gaunt woman in a freshly starched pink cotton dress stood up, her bony fingers twisting nervously together.

"Something ye wanted t' say, Arlene?" Aussy asked.

The woman nodded. She seemed to gather herself for an effort. Then she said, "We got a sick steer t' home. He's one o' the pair that won the pullin' up t' the fair last fall, an' Ellis couldn't leave him. He wanted me t' ask if somebuddy else couldn't make the drawin' fer him, but I—" she faltered—"I got here after the meetin' was started an'—an'—would it be all right?"

"Seems all right t' me," Aussy told her. "Anybuddy got any objection t' Arlene Baxter drawin' fer her husband?"

Again nobody spoke, and Aussy smiled at Mrs. Baxter. "All right, Arlene," he said. "Looks like ye might be the only woman in the country t' make a drawin' in the Draft. Just line up with the rest of us, anybuddy takin' any place he wants. The's twenty-four cards in the box, one fer every man inside the age, and twenty-one of 'em is blank. The other three have crosses on 'em, and whoever gits a cross is drawed. We'll call the roll now, and then line up."

Twenty-three men and one woman answered the roll call and formed a line. Simon scrouged down, unconsciously boring his

chin into the window sill, as the line moved slowly by the box, each showing his card as he drew.

Ed Dow was fourth in the line. He drew the first cross. A pasty look came over his face, and then he flushed bright red. A woman laughed, and cried:

"There!"

He crumpled the card and took a seat against the wall, his eyes more like bullet holes than ever.

The line moved on, and Oscar Feelan, one of three bachelor brothers from Crockett Hill, drew the second cross. He grinned and looked at his brothers as if the joke were on them.

Temp was between Roger Benton and Aussy Parker. There were four ahead of him; then three, then two, then one; and as each of these men showed his card a blank and stepped aside, the hush in the hall was broken by a sighing murmur from the women.

Roger Benton showed a blank card, and Temp stepped up to the box. Simon couldn't see the cross on his card, but he knew something had happened because the line broke up and men crowded around him expressing regret. Simon glanced at his mother. She had partly risen from the bench and Ida's arm was around her drawing her back. All the color seemed to have run from her face into Ida's.

Simon turned to Web. "Did—did Pa get——?"

Web nodded and gulped and dropped a sympathetic arm over Simon's shoulders. Simon's chin quivered and he pressed it down hard on the window sill.

A woman's voice rose above the hum, crying, "Well, anyhow, you got t' go, Ed Dow!"

"Oh, no, I ain't!" Dow retorted.

Something in his voice made Simon suddenly tense. He looked at Dow and saw him standing there, swaying like a bear and showing his teeth.

"Arty Coulter'll be goin' in my place," Dow went on. He looked about defiantly, and then said loudly, "And if you, Temp Thurston, or you, Oscar Feelan, think ye kin beat me out, just say so, an' we'll see who gits t' Arty first!"

The momentary silence hung thick with suspense. Then Temp

turned to Dow and his mouth curled with contempt, as he said:

"You're welcome to anything you can buy from Arty Coulter!"

Oscar Feelan laughed. "That goes fer me too—double," he said. "I wouldn't pay nobuddy t' go fer me—not even five dollars—" he laughed again—"if I had it!"

"But you fellers," Jotham Davis said, "ain't a-goin' t' leave Ed have a clear chance at Arty?"

"You heard me," Oscar Feelan said.

Temp didn't answer. His mouth tightened in a sort of smile that wasn't a smile, and his eyes had a haunting look as he turned toward the women in the back of the hall. Then his jaw set and he turned back to the men around him.

Simon looked at his mother. There were red spots in her cheeks and she was saying something to Ida and Sarah. Ida's mouth was open and Sarah's eyes were large. Cora spoke to Grace Benton and Nelly Gregg on the other side of her. They leaned forward and all five of them talked briefly. Ida and Cora got up and moved to the aisle. The others turned and whispered to women behind them and moved to the aisle themselves. Ida and Cora kept on to the door.

Simon glanced at Web and with silent accord they dropped to the ground and ran around to the porch. Their mothers came out a moment later and Cora's face lighted as she saw them.

"Ride home and hitch the mare to the wagon," she said. "And hurry—we've got to beat Ed Dow to Arty's!"

She spoke quickly and there was something in her voice that gave Simon a prickly feeling along his spine.

"You want we should drive over here for ye?" Web asked.

"No," Cora said. "We'll be home by the time you're hitched up. Hurry!"

Simon and Web ran for the pony and galloped home.

"What's the matter?" Alice Gregg asked anxiously, and before they could answer, "Did Pa get drawed?"

The boys fell off the pony and Web dropped the reins over the hitching post. "No," he said over his shoulder as they hurried to the wagon house. "But Temp an' Ed Dow did, an' Ma an' Cory's comin' t' beat Ed down to Arty's."

Simon took one shaft and Web the other and they pulled the

driving wagon outside. They ran to the barn and Web got down the harness while Simon led out the mare. They got the harness on and led her out and Web held up the shafts while Simon backed her between them. By the time they had the mare hitched to the wagon, their mothers were coming up through the hay field. They started to drive down to meet them, but Cora waved them back, and called:

"Wait there!"

"But we see Ed's rig at the hall," Web shouted. "He'll beat ye!"

Cora shook her head and waved them back. They waited in the dooryard. Cora and Ida were out of breath when they reached the dooryard. Cora hurried into the house and Ida came to the wagon and took the lines and got in.

"The women folks," Ida panted, "is jammin' up—around the door. They'll hold Ed back—till we git a start."

"But what you goin' t' Arty's for?" Alice wanted to know.

"Hire him t' substitute—for Temp," Ida told her. "Cory's gettin' the money."

Cora came out with a small canvas bag. It clinked as she got in the wagon. Ida shook the lines and clucked to the mare, scarcely giving Cora time to get seated. The mare went briskly down the driveway and up the road at a rapid trot. Simon and Web went out to the road. They were watching the wagon when Bunny and Freem came crawling out of the standing hay across the road.

"Where they goin'?" Bunny asked, looking up the road.

"Where you been?" Simon demanded.

Freem's shy grin had a guilty look, but Bunny was defiant.

"It's none o' your——" Bunny began, but Web interrupted, crying:

"Oh, gorry, there's Ed! He's got out o' the hall an' got ahead o' them!"

Simon looked in time to see Dow's horse and wagon flash by the turn in a cloud of dust, and his mother and Ida weren't halfway to the turn. An impelling urge to do something quickly came over him. But he didn't know what to do, and he shivered.

"Web!" he said, involuntarily.

"Eyah," Web looked at Simon and seemed suddenly to wake up. "Come on!" he cried, and started for the pony. "Mebby we kin beat Ed an' tell Arty!"

He vaulted on the pony and whipped up the reins, and Simon piled on behind him. He headed the pony through the barn, out through the orchard and across the fields to the lower pasture gate. Simon dropped to the ground and opened the gate, closed it behind them and swung onto the pony again. They cut through the pasture and took Temp's wood road that ran deep into the wood lot. From the end of the road they dodged trees and bushes at a trot, jumped the low stone wall and went through thinning trees to the Plains.

The pony stretched out in a run across the Plains. He was breathing heavily when they reached the wood road on the other side, and Web slowed him to an easy gallop till he was breathing easier. It was three miles by the hill and ridge and Plainsboro road to Arty Coulter's, and little over two miles by the much straighter road the boys were taking.

"It's goin' t' be kind of close," Web said, and urged the pony again. Low-hanging branches made them duck at times, and bushes dragged at their feet and made harder going for the pony. They came out on the meadows of Deadwater Stream and galloped up the edge. A shout came from an opening in the trees. They looked, and there was Arty Coulter, grinning at them.

"What's your hurry?" he called. "Come on over an' help me pick some blueb'rries!" He held up a pail and grinned again.

Web laughed suddenly. "Oh, gorry!" he said, and swung the pony toward Arty. Breathlessly, he and Simon told Arty what had happened. Arty listened, at first a little puzzled, and then his shrewd eyes brightened.

"So Ed figures t' hire me, does he?" He gave a short laugh. "We'll see about that!" He cocked his head as a shout came down the meadows.

"Arty! Arty Coulter!"

"There he is, now!" Simon said.

Arty nodded and rubbed his stubbly chin with his hand. Then he grinned. "You boys lead the pony back in the woods, out o'

sight of the meadow. Keep a-goin'—" he waved his arm in a half-circle "—around towards my bridge an' don't make no more noise than ye have to. I'll toll Ed down here and then ketch up t' ye."

"Arty! Where be ye?" came Ed Dow's shout again.

The boys slipped into the woods with the pony, and Arty cupped his hand and called in a voice that had a far-off sound:

"Down here—do-own on the me-e-eadow! Who-o be ye-e?"

"It's me—Ed Dow. Come up here—I got t' see ye quick!"

"I'm pickin' be-erries. Ye want t' see me, come on down he-ere."

The boys worked their way through the woods as quietly as they could. They were nearly halfway to Arty's bridge when they heard Ed Dow swear suddenly out on the meadow.

"Oh, gorry!" Web snickered. "I bet he fell into that old beaver ditch." He handed the reins to Simon and slipped away toward the meadow. A few moments later he was back again, grinning. "He did, all right, and ain't he mad!" he whispered to Simon. "Listen."

There was a thud from the meadows, as of a heavy body falling, and Dow swore again. They heard him muttering as he moved downstream, and then he called:

"Where in hell are ye?"

"Down here," came Arty's voice faintly.

Web bent over double, snickering. Simon grinned a little. Then he said, "Hadn't we ought to be gettin' along?"

They went on till they judged they were opposite the island, and worked out to the edge of the woods and waited there. Presently Arty joined them.

"I cal'late Ed'll mess around down there fer quite a while," he chuckled. "See ary thing of your mas yit?"

They told him they hadn't, and he said, "Better tie up your pony here an' we'll go out towards the road."

He led the way to his log bridge and stood there a moment looking down at this shallower northern channel that helped to make the island. The southern channel, being deeper, carried all the water in dry times, and as Deadwater Stream was the town line between Council Rock and Plainsboro, it was only in

dry times that the town line didn't split and go around the island. Arty had never established himself by claiming either town, and, by reason of his island home between them, neither town, as yet, had found the authority to claim him.

"Well, she ain't only dry," Arty said. "She's bone dry, and I cal'late that puts me in Council Rock." He laughed and took the path toward the road.

A moment later he stopped and listened, peering upstream and then looking back over his shoulder. "Looks like Ed ain't s' dumb as I thought," he said. "Here he comes, an' yonder come's your ma," he said to Simon. "I don't like this—you boys better git out o' sight."

Simon and Web darted into the bushes and lay on their stomachs, looking out. They heard Ed Dow thrashing through the brush at the edge of the meadow and then he came into sight in the clearing.

"Well," he said. "I cal'late we must of passed each other." There was anger in his eyes and he was a little out of breath, but he was smiling and showing his square horse teeth. "I got news fer ye, Arty. They're a-comin' after ye—they found the stream's dry this side the island an' that leaves ye in Council Rock."

Arty grunted. "What's that t' me?"

"But ain't ye heard they're holdin' the army drawin's t'day?"

"Eyah, I heerd it."

"Well, then, ye ain't goin' t' let 'em take ye fer nothin', be ye?"

Arty didn't answer immediately. He stood there, ragged elbows akimbo, hat on the back of his head, whisker-stubbled chin at an impudent angle, looking quizzically at Dow, much as a shrewd and somewhat tattered sparrow might look at a pompous crow.

"What's all this got t' do with you?" he finally inquired.

Dow wagged his shoulders and his tone became confidential. "Now we're gittin' somewheres," he said. "I got too much prope'ty t' look after t' run the chance of gittin' drawed. Now I got a paper here that says you're takin' my place. You sign it and I'll hand ye over some money."

"How much?" Coulter asked.

Simon raised his head and looked toward the path to the road.

"Where's Ma and Ida?" he whispered. "Didn't you hear 'em comin' a while ago?"

"Eyah," Web whispered back. He raised his head and both boys peered through the bushes, moving their heads and craning their necks. Then Simon said, "Oh, I see 'em! Back of that spruce. What's Ma waitin' for?"

Web shook his head. They worked their way backwards, carefully, to where they could see their mothers as well as Dow and Arty Coulter. They saw Cora say something to Ida, and Ida nod, and then both of them disappear. Then they heard Cora say:

"I've got—some money—too!"

Arty shook his head and smiled reproachfully, as if he hadn't wanted Cora to show herself so soon. He started toward her and Ida, but Dow put out a big hand and stopped him.

"Don't waste your time on her, Arty," he said. "When I say money, I mean money." He got a wallet from his pocket and took out some bills. "Money," he said. "One hunderd dollars of it. Here!"

"A hunderd dollars!" Coulter spoke jeering and spit. "Hell, the Gov'mint gits three hunderd dollars fer lettin' a man off!"

"Not any more they don't," Dow told him. "They——"

"I've got three hundred dollars. Right——" Cora stopped, as if the look Dow gave her had frozen the words in her throat.

"All right," Dow cried to Arty. "I'll give ye three hunderd dollars!"

Coulter glanced at Cora but took the bills Dow handed him, and began to count them. Simon and Web looked at each other, and Simon wet his lips and gulped. Then Arty said:

"What's the use countin' 'em? Even if the' is three hunderd here, they ain't worth the half of it—they're greenbacks."

"I've got gold!" Cora gasped. She stumbled toward Arty, holding out the sack.

Dow's lips drew away from his teeth. He knocked the sack from Cora's hands as Arty reached for it. "She never saw that much money," he snarled. "Here, you listen t' me!" He caught Coulter's arm. "I'll make ye a pardner with me in the tann'ry!"

Arty jerked away from him and laughed. "I wouldn't take the gift o' the whole of it," he said. "You been tellin' it around all

spring that ye couldn't make more'n day wages out of it; and where would I come in? You keep your tann'ry an' keep your greenbacks—the both of 'em ain't worth this here gold!"

Dow made a snarling grab for him, but Arty jumped back and ran to the bank of the channel. He stooped there and straightened up with a rock the size of his fist in his fingers. Dow stopped uncertainly, his big hands opening and closing. Then he gave Cora and Ida a savage look and started for them.

The rock that Arty had picked up gave Simon and Web an idea; the ground was gravelly where they lay, with many stones the size of hen's eggs, and the boys came to their feet with stones in both hands. Their arms went back and the stones began to sail over the low bushes and zip past Ed Dow's head. He stopped again.

Cora and Ida were backing away from Dow, and Arty said to them, "Over this way."

A stone thudded against Dow's leg and another bounced from the arm he had up to shield his face. As the women hurried out of Arty's range of fire, he said, "Git goin', Ed, an' keep a-goin', or I'll bust ye wide open." He swung back his arm suggestively and Dow got going. The big man put his head down and went at a stumbling run to the path and up it toward the road.

Simon and Web looked at each other, and Web burst out laughing and Simon grinned. They went out to the small clearing and Simon watched his mother anxiously. She was pale and her lips had a blue look, but spots of red began to show in her cheeks as Arty picked up the canvas sack and came toward her.

"You—you'll take—Temp's place?" she asked.

"I sure will," he said. "I'm just sorry ye didn't keep back in the brush till I got rid of Ed."

A questioning look came into Cora's eyes. "But how did you know—what I wanted?"

"The boys told me." Arty jerked a thumb toward them and grinned.

Cora's eyes widened as she saw the boys. "Why, how—how did you get here?"

"The wood road—" Simon told her and pointed—"on the pony."

"We figured we could git here before Ed did, and tell Arty," Web grinned. "An' we did!"

Ida let out a gusty sigh and smiled. "Well, it turned out all right, anyhow," she said.

"Ye better take this now," Arty chuckled, as he held out the sack to Cora, "afore I fergit t' give it back."

"But it's yours," Cora said.

Arty shook his head. "Oh, no it ain't. It don't take no money t' git me into the army."

"But we couldn't—Temp couldn't let you take his place without——"

"Oh, yes, he kin. I ain't felt right about stayin' out o' the army, but I kind of couldn't go in without somethin' happened—somethin' like this."

Cora looked at him appealingly. "But I can't ask you just to take Temp's place. He'd have to go, don't you see?"

"What she means," Ida said, "is she's afraid Temp would go anyways if she didn't have a receipt that you was hired for Temp's substitute."

Arty smiled wryly. "I never thought o' that, but you're right. He's the kind of a feller you got to sew up tight. But we'll fix it so's he's got t' stay home. I got a pencil an' some paper over t' my place; we'll go over there an' write up somethin'."

They crossed to the island and in Arty's shack Cora contrived a receipt, in which, for value received, Arthur Coulter contracted to act as Temple Thurston's substitute in the army. Arty signed it and handed it to Cora.

"Now," he said, "I'll go out to your waggin with ye, in case Ed might be hangin' around."

He picked up the sack and winked at Simon as the gold coins jingled. They had just crossed the bridge when Arty cocked his head toward the road and stopped.

"Somebody comin'," he said. "Better git back on the bridge, it's mebby Ed, an' I kin keep him off from there."

Ida and Cora went back across the bridge, but Web and Simon, remembering the stones, scooted for the bushes around the clearing. Arty kicked loose another good-sized rock and waited.

Then Temp appeared at the end of the path, with Aussy a stride behind him. They came up to Arty and stopped. Temp glanced at Cora and back at Arty. The skin on his face seemed tightly stretched and had a bleached look beneath its tan. His eyes dropped to the canvas sack. After a moment, he said:

"Give it back to her, Arty."

He spoke quietly but there was a quality in his voice that Simon had never heard before. He scrouged down into the bushes and held his breath.

Arty gave Temp a queer look and then turned and said to Cora, "Was this money his, or yourn?"

"M-mine," Cora stammered.

Coulter grinned and tipped up his chin and slanted his eyes at Temp. "And now it's mine," he said. "Your wife's done hired her a soldier. The deal's made; I got the money and she's got her receipt. So ye might as well go home an' fergit about the army."

Temp's jaw muscles twitched. He glanced at Cora, a cornered look, and his hands curled into fists. Simon sucked in a tremulous breath. And then Aussy began to chuckle. The chuckle suddenly rose to laughter, booming, infectious. Ida began to laugh, and Arty joined her.

"Oh, my Godfrey!" Aussy cried, and his voice seemed to rumble up from deep in the ground. "If this ain't the——" he wrapped his arms about his stomach and went off in another paroxysm.

Color came into Temp's face and he got redder and redder. He turned to Aussy and Aussy looked at him weakly and put his hands on Temp's shoulders.

"Man—man!" he said. "When the town hears about this it'll bust a gut. But they won't be laughin' at you. Man—just look at it! Ed Dow, whittled down to a whisker, an' singed and curled and throwed into the army—all by a woman! Oh, my Godfrey! And if they don't vote Cory a medal fer it——" Aussy hugged himself and roared again.

"You got it wrong," Temp said thickly. "I was drawed an' I got to go."

"No," Aussy told him. "You was drawed, all right, but ye ain't a-goin'. Arty fills our quota, an' the town ain't allowin' no

more volunteers. No," Aussy said, and his shoulders shook. "There ain't a thing ye kin do about it—except go over an' tell Cory you're mighty glad she kep' ye home!"

Temp looked at Aussy, and then at Cora. She was looking at him wistfully and he crossed the bridge quickly to her. Simon couldn't hear what they said, but he saw Arty looking toward the bushes and making covert motions with his hand.

"What's he want?" Simon whispered to Web.

"Looks like he wants us t' lay low," Web whispered.

They lay low. Temp came across the bridge with Cora and Ida. He looked at Arty and then held out his hand.

"Good luck to ye," he said.

Arty grinned. "Much obliged. But I'm figurin' t' have me some fun out o' this—an' some o' the fun's a-goin' t' be with that feller, Dow, when we git into the army." Arty gave Temp a shrewd look. "But if he don't git killed, ye want t' look out fer him when the war's over."

"Say," Aussy ejaculated, "I cal'late we better git goin'! We passed Ed up the road a piece an', the way he looked, it's likely he'll take some ketchin'."

"Land o' love," Ida cried. "I never thought of it, but if that critter gits away, we'll have t' send somebody in his place! Come on!"

She hurried up the path with Aussy and Cora and Temp behind her. Arty stood where he was, and presently signaled the boys to come out.

"Here," he said, and handed Simon the sack. "You git this home afore your folks do, an' give it to your ma when your pa ain't around. Now git!"

"And tell your pas," he called after them, "that I'll be watchin' fer Ed up at the turn with my gun—an' he won't git by me!"

12

IN LATER years, when Simon thought of his early childhood, two events stood out with unforgettable vividness. He remembered Web's pony, but it formed merely part of the background of Henry Locke's home-coming and of that afternoon of the Draft when he and Web raced to beat Ed Dow to Arty Coulter's. He would never forget the feeling that sight of Henry's empty sleeve had given him, or how he and Web had stoned Ed Dow and then spent the evening in apprehension till Dow was caught and locked up under guard, to be taken the next morning to Augusta and the army.

He remembered vaguely about starting to school and about the births of Margaret and Janice, his younger half sisters, and of cute little Deborah Grant. Less vaguely, he recalled the hard times that came to the whole countryside during his sixth and seventh years, when the potato crops failed, threatening ruin to Aussy Parker's starch business and economic collapse to the town, and how Temp had found a way out of the trouble by using the starch factory to manufacture cheese, an all-year-round business that put the town back on its feet.

The next thing that remained vividly fixed in his memory was the ax he got on the Christmas before his tenth birthday. He was a big boy then, not yet so tall as Web, who was growing fast himself, but broader and thicker and heavier, and ever so much stronger. The ax was a present from Temp, a man's ax, but with a clean-cut head, hand-forged by Russ Graham, that made all the other axes he'd ever seen seem clumsy. With its smooth fitted handle it had a balance that made it seem feather-light, and it lifted him to a sort of seventh heaven of joy.

And tied in with the ax was the memory of his first real set-to with Bunny, his first fright over his mother and his first remembered lesson on responsibility. He was still enough of a little boy to take the ax to bed with him that Christmas night, not into bed, but leaning against the bed, where he could reach the smooth haft.

It had been a snowless fall and the ground had been bare on Christmas Day for the first time that Simon could remember, but the next morning soft white snow hung from branches and bushes and covered roofs and the ground to a depth of three or four inches. He was the first one up and took his ax out to the woodshed and set to work; but it wasn't work, it was fun. With only a candle lantern for light, he would lean a sixteen-inch chunk of maple against the splitting block and the ax would flash over his head.

"Hoof," he would grunt as he struck. The ax would clang as he turned it sideways and a two-inch slab would fly from the chunk. He wore no hat and his tawny hair was like pale gold in the candlelight. He wasn't aware that anybody was watching him until Temp spoke.

"Kind of like it, do ye?" Temp said.

Simon turned, grinning widely. "Gorry, it's a dandy. I bet Web and me can get out all our firewood next spring!"

Temp chuckled. "Mebby," he said. "But I cal'late ye'll have to help me with the barn chores now; I'm late."

When they had filled the first two pails of milk, Simon carried them to the milk room. Then he went back to the woodshed, stacked a man-sized load on his arm and carried it to the kitchen. He pushed open the door, and stopped. At the farther end, Bunny and Susan were struggling at the sink.

"Get out," Bunny said.

Susan's eyes flashed. "I won't! I got here first!" She caught the waistband of his breeches and pulled. "You get away and let me finish!"

Bunny put a foot against her stomach and straightened his long leg. It was almost a kick, and Susan sat down. Her mouth straightened and her chin became more pointed, but she said nothing. She leaned back on her hands and glared at Bunny. He made a face at her, and then stiffened as he saw Simon.

Simon walked deliberately to the wood box, dumped his load and turned. He looked at Bunny and Bunny looked back at him, defiantly. Then Simon walked over to his half brother and, regardless of flailing arms and legs, picked him up and carried him outside, held his face down in the snow and scrubbed it hard.

"You want to get washed, do you," Simon muttered. "All right, I'll wash you!" It suddenly came to him that Bunny had been christened Washburn, and he began to laugh. "Wash, Wash," he chanted. "Wash, Wash; Wash, Wash!"

He stood up and looked down at his half brother, grinning. "How do you like it, Wash?" he asked.

Wash sat up and brushed the snow from his face. He didn't speak, but his eyes burned at Simon. Simon went into the back entry and back to the barn to help carry out the rest of the milk. Coming back with two pails, he had to set one down to open the door into the wagon shed. As the door opened he heard something in the woodshed, queer noises, as if somebody were jumping around. His ax was in there and, suddenly suspicious of Wash, he set down the other pail of milk and tiptoed forward.

It was daylight now and he could see the handle of his ax tilted up against the woodshed walkway. He reached the door in time to see Wash jump in the air and come down with both feet striking hard at the handle. But the handle was too smooth and too stiffly springy, and Wash's feet slipped and threw him on his shoulder. He rolled quickly to his hands and knees but Simon was on him before he could rise.

They went over in a tangle of arms and legs. Wash's head struck the chopping block and he went suddenly limp. Simon's flaming rage subsided to a cold anger. He hauled Wash over to the light and felt his head. There was a lump on one side and he went out and got a double handful of snow, rubbed it on the bump and on Wash's face and neck. Wash's eyes flickered open. He stared blankly for a moment. Then his eyes came to a focus on Simon's and he leered defiantly.

They looked at each other, and Simon said, "I wish to Godfrey you was big enough to hit!" He hauled Wash to his feet and gave him a shove that sent him flying toward the kitchen. He reached for his ax and felt the haft and ran his eye along it to

make sure it was still all right. Then he took it to the barn and hid it, and carried in the milk.

The other children were at the table eating breakfast when Simon and Temp finished the barn chores and came to the kitchen. Simon glanced at Wash and got a smoky-eyed stare in return. For the second time that morning he wished that Wash were as big as himself. Long ago, Cora had impressed on him the necessity of being careful with his brothers and sisters, and with others as well who were smaller than himself.

"You're so much bigger, and so very much stronger," she told him, "that you could hurt somebody badly before you realized it. So you must be careful."

It had become so nearly instinctive with him, now, that he didn't mind being careful, except, at times, with Wash; and he wasn't as careful with Wash, always, as he should have been. Wash knew this, but it seemed to make no difference to him; if he felt like annoying Simon he was just as annoying as he felt like being, and took his punishment without a whimper. Simon found this extremely irritating; but he had a respect for Wash that he didn't have for Parker.

He looked at Parker, now; not for any comparison, but because Parker was gobbling his oatmeal as if everything depended on his cleaning his bowl before anybody else and so assuring himself of an abundant second helping. His chin was smeared and his whole face had a damp overheated look and his eyes went from bowl to bowl about the table with furtive greed. At six years, Parker looked more like a toad than ever, and Simon's nose wrinkled with disgust.

As he went to his place at the table, Simon had the urge to push Parker's face down into his bowl and hold it there, but he hated to touch him, and he compromised by snatching the bowl and setting it in the middle of the table. An involuntary cry of anguish gurgled around the oameal in Parker's mouth. He gave Simon a cringing look and then turned to watch his bowl, but he made no attempt to retrieve it until Simon had sat down at the table.

"Piggy," Susan said to Parker, and pushed his bowl within his reach. She smiled at Simon and he gave her a grimacing wink.

Temp and Aussy were going to clean the vats at the starch factory that morning and, after breakfast, when Temp was leaving, Simon said to him:

"Tell Web I'll be over soon as I've split some more wood."

"I cal'late he'll be helpin' us this morning," Temp told him.

Simon's face clouded. "Well—I guess I'll go over anyhow."

He got his ax from the barn and split wood for an hour. Then he went across the field to the factory. Aussy and Temp and Web were all in the second vat, scrubbing the bricks of its circular wall with bristle brushes, when he went in. He looked down at Web and asked:

"How you comin'?"

"Slow," Web answered. "If we get through by noon we'll be lucky."

Simon was disappointed. Then he brightened. "Can't I do something too so you can get through sooner?"

"Not a thing," Aussy told him. "It's kind of crowded down here now."

Simon hung around, fingering his ax. Presently, he held it up so Web could see it. "Guess I'll go try her out in the wood lot," he grinned.

"Eyah," Web laughed. "You got time t' work up a cord by noon."

Simon wrinkled his nose. "I got a good three hours, anyhow," he said. "How about comin' over with your ax after dinner?"

Web laughed again. "You an' your ax! I'll bring my new gun."

"All right," Simon said, and went off.

He wasn't sure where Wash and Freem Grant were, but he didn't want them tagging after him; if he couldn't have Web for company in the woods he would rather be alone. So he went up the lane by the Parkers' house, cut across the Grants' field, around his own barn and down through the orchard and pasture to the wood lot. Well down the wood road he selected a twelve-inch yellow birch and set to work on it. The yellow chips flew as he notched the tree so it would fall parallel with the road. At every stroke the ax fell true to a hair line, leaving the cut as smooth as if it had been planed. He went to the other

side of the tree and started his falling cut. The ax rose and fell with a steady unhurried swing. It bit into the tree with a clean precision that made Simon tingle with pleasure. After a while the birch began to lean a little, then more, and Simon swung the ax quickly, once more, twice, and stepped back and watched it fall.

He had trimmed off the lower branches when he thought he heard a call. He listened and it came again; somebody calling from across the Plains. The words were unintelligible, but the tone sent Simon off on the run. At the end of the wood road he became aware of the ax in his hand. He wished he had left it at the birch but, as he'd carried it this far, he concluded to keep it with him, and he ran on, dodging trees and thickets.

Beyond the stone wall that formed Temp's southern boundary the trees began to thin out and, presently, Simon was on the Plains. The broad expanse of snow, unbroken by a tree or even a bush, was so dazzlingly bright that it made his eyes water. He had to blink and squint to see anything. The going was much easier at first, but he soon struck the potato fields and the ridges and hollows slowed him down to a stumbling trot. He was near enough now to recognize Sam Bradbury's voice, and every few minutes Sam would yell something. The only word Simon could distinguish was "Ethel," and he knew that Sam was calling to his wife, but he couldn't make out anything more, except that Sam sounded scared.

It was over a mile from Temp's wood lot to Sam Bradbury's gate to the Plains, and Simon found Sam across the Plains from the gate, down in the gray birches toward the end of Saddleback Ridge. Sam was sitting on his ox sled, humped over, and between calls for his wife he swore at his oxen. Simon couldn't figure it out until he got close enough to see the red spots on the snow.

"Hello," he said. "You cut yourself?"

Sam's back was toward him and Sam slewed around, holding onto his foot. "Well," he barked, "it's a dang good thing somebuddy heered me afore I bled t' death! Them blasted steers—— Kin you drive 'em? All I kin do from here is mill around—mill around! The dumb-witted bastards!"

Simon got the goad-stick from the sled and punched the steers. "W'hysh," he said, and started them toward home. Walking beside the near ox's head, Simon looked back at the birches. "What you after them for?" he asked.

"After 'em fer? Why, t' burn! What ye think—I ain't no beaver!"

Simon looked at him incredulously. "But you—you ain't out of wood this early?"

"Out of it? Hell, no. How kin ye be out o' something ye ain't had? That blasted hell-warmed stream," he swore. "I cut my wood up on Otis Wicks' lot, and the sanctified ice went out afore I could git it hauled! All summer without no wood but slabs an' gray birch, an' time the ice got thick enough this fall t' haul it, I had t' go git a stitch in my back."

Sam grunted with pain as the sled tilted over a hummock. "W'hysh there, ye dumb-wits!" he yelled at the oxen.

They came to the potato rows and Simon guided the oxen up them to the gate, on through the pasture and hayfield and around the barn to the house.

"Ethel," Sam shouted. "Ethel, come out here an' help me git in!"

Mrs. Bradbury's startled face appeared at a window and then she ran out the door. "Why, Sam!" she cried. "Whatever's the matter?"

"My back," he snapped. "It caught me agin, right in the middle of a swing, an' I dang nigh cut off my foot!"

"Oh, dear, ain't that just——"

"Don't stan' there moanin'—help me inside and go git Freem!"

With Sam hopping on one foot between them, Simon and Mrs. Bradbury got him in the house and into a chair. They pulled off his boot and two layers of socks and Mrs. Bradbury washed the cut. It had stopped bleeding but started again, and Mrs. Bradbury bound it up.

"It didn't cut no ligamints," she said. "But I cal'late it'll need sewin' up, an' I better go down after Freem."

Simon helped her hitch the horse to the sleigh and she drove to the village after Doctor Luce. On his way to the house, Simon

stopped at the woodshed to carry in some wood but, except for a few armfuls of slabs, it was empty. He went to the kitchen, and said to Sam:

"I'll take the steers an' get up a load of gray birch—enough to last till somebody can haul your wood downstream."

He didn't wait for an answer from Sam and went out to where the steers were still waiting patiently. He took Sam's ax from its cleat on the shed, put his own ax in the cleat and drove the steers down across the Plains to the gray birch clumps. Picking the largest of the trees, he cut a load of them that were four to six inches thick at the butt, bound them to the sled with Sam's log chains and started back up the Plains. When he reached the house he saw that Mrs. Bradbury had returned with the doctor. He went to the window and looked in. The doctor was sewing up Sam's foot and talking to him severely about not asking for help when he had a lame back.

Simon had to grin at Sam's swivel-eyed expression. He put the steers in the barn, got the sawhorse and bucksaw from the woodshed and began bucking up the birch poles to stove-box length. The doctor came out and smiled.

"Well," he said in his cheery voice, "that's a good job, Simon. But we'll have his winter wood hauled downstream in another day or two. You might ask your pa if he can spare his steers t' help out."

"I was figurin' to," Simon told him. "And we'd ought to get somebody to do Sam's chores."

"I'll tend to that." Doctor Luce smiled again and got into his sleigh and drove off.

Simon was so busy that he lost all track of time. He finished sawing up the poles and was pitching the last of the chunks in the woodshed when he heard snow-muffled steps behind him. He turned and saw Temp and Web coming. They looked hot and concerned and there was an angry glint in Temp's eyes. Simon's grin of welcome faded.

"Wha—what's the matter?" he asked.

"Git along home," Temp said tightly. "You've scairt your ma into a bad heart spell, stayin' away like this. Don't stand there like a dummy! Git goin'!"

13

SIMON never forgot how his mother looked when he reached home that day. There was a fragile quality in her face and voice that tightened his throat and affected him even more than Doctor Luce's warning: that she must never again be frightened like that.

But what Temp told him that evening when they were milking made less impression on him. Temp had recovered from his anger and he laid a gentle hand on Simon's shoulder. Simon thrilled warmly to the touch and looked up.

"Listen," Temp said, and Simon stopped milking. "It's fine to help folks," Temp went on in the slow kindly voice that Simon loved. "Like you're helpin' me now, and like you helped Sam today. But a feller that's big enough to do them things is big enough to think what's likely to happen to somebody else, like what happened to your ma today. You want to remember the's other folks to think about besides them you're with."

Years later, Simon recalled these words and, with them, others that showed Temp's love; and he wished he had taken them more to heart. But they were years of active boyhood; thoughtlessly selfish boyhood when the woods were becoming Simon's first love and everything else was a bore. And during those years, Simon grew. When he was twelve he was as tall as Web, and when he was fifteen he could look over the top of Web's head, which was five feet and ten inches from the ground. He had widened and thickened in proportion and his bones were padded with nothing but muscles, long and flat, hard yet supple.

Beginning that March after Temp's present of the ax, Simon and Web, in the March vacations, got in the firewood for both

their families. They felled and trimmed the trees, crosscut them to four-foot lengths and hauled them; eight cords to the Parkers' and twelve to the larger Thurston house. After school and on Saturdays, they split and bucked it up to stove length and stacked it in loose tiers in the nearly empty woodsheds. Yellow birch, rock maple and beech made the best firewood. Oak was good but it took too long to dry, and white birch and swamp maple dozed too easily. Gray birch was the best green wood to burn.

Knowledge of such matters was never learned as a lesson; it came by a sort of natural absorption and by experience. And experience had taught Simon a number of other things. He looked on life from a more sophisticated angle. While the world was still a grand place, the business of living had its drawbacks. Two things in particular plagued Simon: school and farming. He regarded them as necessary evils and submitted to their exactions; and a few more years would see the end of them, an end to the wearying days in the schoolroom when he longed to be outdoors. And when he was twenty-one, he could thumb his nose at farming and take to the woods, lumbering and peeling pulp wood.

Simon's eyes kindled at the prospect. In four years and nine months he would be his own boss! Ever since Web had finished school, he'd been marking off the months; and there were thirty-seven of those months in which he'd had to endure the irritation of Web's freedom. Web didn't have any farming to do, only a garden to look after. And Web was twenty-one and had work that he liked—cattle and lumbering and making cheese, now that there was no money in starch. Web was working for his father, when there was anything to work at. But there wasn't much business of any kind, now. Nobody had any money, and Temp had planted extra crops in the attempt to make ends meet. Just thinking of the work to be done filled Simon with an overwhelming boredom.

He was tempted, that summer, to run away. Custer . . . Sitting Bull . . . Indian fighting. . . . His imagination was fired. But Web laughed at him.

"You," Web jeered, "out on the plains? Why, the' ain't any

woods out there. What would you do without any woods?"

Simon grinned sheepishly. He hadn't thought of that. It made a difference, so much difference that his vision of the West went out like a snuffed candle.

"I'll tell you something better," Web said. "Pa says the time t' buy is when others want t' sell, an' the's likely t' be a lot of timber sold this fall that folks don't want t' pay taxes on. The's a hell's-dose of second-growth stuff in the town that's nearly ready t' cut, an Pa's figurin' t' buy in everything that's offered."

Simon's eyes widened. "Where'd he get all the money?"

"He ain't aimin' t' pay a whole lot. And he's still got most of what he made on the stuff he got out right after the Boston fire."

Simon smiled. "Gorry, that's right; and we didn't do so bad ourselves that winter." His eyes lost focus, turning back to that Christmas vacation when he and Web had gone into the woods and got out timber for Aussy at a dollar a thousand. Aussy had hired all the men he could get and had sold over a million feet of lumber to the Boston lumberyards. His eyes kindled and he looked at Web. "You reckon there'll ever be any such sale for lumber again?"

"You better bet the' will! Look at all that young stuff that your folks own up the stream—they'd never bought it if they'd figured folks would ever get through buyin' lumber. And Pa says these hard times can't last much longer. We've had close t' three years of it, and the time ain't far off when the swing'll start up again. How about you an' me pickin' up some acr'age?"

"Us?" Simon blinked. Then he grinned. "I couldn't buy enough to make a windbreak for our dooryard."

"You got *some* money, ain't you?"

"Around fifteen dollars."

"It's enough for a starter," Web said. "You know them Christmas trees a couple miles this side of Parlin Pond?"

Parlin Pond was the source of the south branch, nine miles above the village. From there to the eastern end of Saddleback, Simon knew the size and kind of the valley's timberlands within hauling distance of the sawmill. He could form a mental picture of any section of the valley as clearly as if it were Temp's wood lot. He grinned and nodded.

"Mebby you didn't know," Web said, "that your fifteen dollars'll buy seven an' a half acres of them Christmas trees right now."

"What's seven and a half acres amount to?"

"If I laid fifteen dollars alongside o' yours, we'd have fifteen acres. And if we get busy with our traps this fall we can double it up some more."

"But fur ain't worth anything," Simon said.

"It will be. Solly Wise come through this morning. He's payin' twice what he give last fall an' said he could mebby do better'n that."

"He did? Say, that's something! If we had the luck we did two years ago, why——" Simon's eyes gleamed. "We better get busy lookin' for sign."

The last of the summer dragged out as Simon had never known it to. And even after school began, he had to help Temp on Saturdays; plowing, picking apples, hauling grain to be threshed and ground at Jessup's Mills. Until the ground froze, Sundays were the only days he could get off in the woods.

"Don't get in a hurry," Web advised. "Time fur's prime, we'll have a good lay."

"You reckon we'll need some more traps?" Simon asked.

"Eyah. Round half a dozen mink an' coon, three-four fox and the same for otter. I'm goin' up t' Fairview this week with Pa and I'll get 'em there—so's nobuddy'll be askin' questions."

Simon nodded. "You're talkin'. We don't want too many cuttin' in on us. You heard any more about——?" he canted his head upstream.

Web's left eye squinted and his right eyebrow rose. "Come December, we'll get them Christmas trees for the taxes—just like Pa said. Otis told him he'd never spend another cent on that prope'ty."

A wide grin curled Simon's mouth. "Come on, you mink, come on, you marten, come on, you foxes an' otters. Give us some luck an' time we're as old as Aussy an' Pa we'll be cuttin' us some timber!"

November came romping in. A heavy wind and pelting rain stripped the remaining leaves from the hardwoods. They looked strangely naked and forlorn, and their nakedness was empha-

sized by an occasional brown leaf dangling from an oak. Simon and Web ran their trap lines. Simon tended what he could in the early mornings and late afternoons, and Web looked after the others. On Saturdays and Sundays they went out together.

On the third Wednesday of the month, Simon stopped at the Parkers' on his way to school.

"Somebody's thievin'," he said to Web.

Web looked incredulous. "You sure?"

Simon nodded. "I been suspicionin' it since Monday. Somebody's found our sets around this end of Saddleback, an' he's thievin' our catch. I stuck thorn-plum needles around the jaws so they couldn't be sprung or the traps moved without I knew it. This morning, three of 'em had been sprung an' reset. An' that fox set, on the big rock, was gone. I took it off the rock yeste'day and covered it in the rotten spot on the top of that old pine stump. It'd been jerked out but I knew the clog was too heavy for any fox to drag it far. I looked around, and there it was, on top of the rock again; an' it was set! And I found four brown tail hairs caught in the chain."

"Huh," Web grunted. "Looks like we better go gunnin' for somebuddy."

"You're talkin'. I got no mind to leave any thumb-fingered sneak rob me of five acres of timberland. I'm layin' for that feller!"

"Beginnin' this evenin'," Web said, narrow-eyed. "An' we'll see how he likes his pants filled with bird shot."

That afternoon a light snow fell. It was powdery but sufficient for tracking, and it kept the thief away from their traps. By Friday evening the snow was nearly gone, and Web said to Simon:

"He'll likely be after our traps t'morra. Early."

They were skinning out a coon and mink they'd brought in, when Arty Coulter appeared at the back entry and asked for Temp. Temp came to the door.

"I run onto Ed Dow in the woods this afternoon," Arty said. "I kind of thought you'd better know."

Temp, as well as Simon and Web, looked blank. Then Temp said, "Him! Why, I'd clean fergot him!" He frowned and his

eyes flicked sideways through the milk-room door at Simon and Web, and returned to Arty with a worried look. "Well! I kind of looked fer him the first two-three years after the war but when he didn't come back, I figured he'd never show up round here again. Well!" he said again. "I was just about to go down to the store—I'll walk back with ye."

They went out, and Simon and Web looked at each other. A sort of tense excitement held them silent a moment. Then Web said in a low voice:

"You remember him—that big feller back in wartime?"

Simon nodded. "Eyah. But I couldn't think who it was till Pa said that about lookin' for him after the war. Gorry, he didn't like gettin' hit with rocks, did he!" Simon grinned a little at the recollection. Then his grin faded and his eyes narrowed. "You reckon it's him that's robbin' our traps?"

"I'd bet money on it," Web said. "And I'm bettin' he won't like bird shot any better'n he liked rocks." Web's black eyes looked into Simon's blue ones and they grinned at each other, thin grins.

"Well," Web said, "we better finish up these skins. We'll be gettin' out kind of early in the morning and a little extry sleep won't hurt us."

They finished skinning out the coon and the mink, turned the skins wrong side out and pulled them over the stretcher boards. Simon held the boards, his big hands like a pair of vises, while Web set the skins straight and tight.

"Good enough," Web said, and they went in the kitchen and washed their hands and skinning knives.

Wash watched them derisively and it came to Simon that he might be the thief; but he knew immediately that it couldn't be, because Wash not only had an aversion to trapping but couldn't have got out and back to the house in the mornings without being seen. Cora and Susan were talking with Web and, after a little, Web started home.

"I'll be over around four-thirty." he said to Simon.

14

TEMP heard the clock strike four. He listened but there was no sound of Simon getting up and he carried his clothes to the kitchen and dressed out there so he wouldn't arouse Cora. He set his boots by the back entry door where he could find them quickly and went about the kitchen in his socks, silently, first to the clock which he pulled away from the wall. From the nail behind it he took his old double-barreled derringer and its powder flask. The flask was made of heavy leather with a compartment on each side, one for bullets and the other for caps. He dropped them in his pocket and set the clock back in place. Then he felt his way across the kitchen to the bread jar and got out some cold biscuits. He groped into the pantry and got a slab of ham from the cold box, wrapped it in a piece of paper and dropped it on top of the biscuits in his other pocket. He listened a moment and made his way to the back entry again, found his boots and carried them out to the barn.

In spite of the dark he went so quietly that none of the animals heard him. He sat on the flat lid of the long grain box and felt the soles of his socks for splinters. It wouldn't do, he told himself, to get lamed up this morning. He got out the derringer and measured the powder by feel, wadding it down and the two bullets on top. He pushed the caps on the nipples and carefully let the hammers down. He put the derringer back in his pocket, pulled on his boots, got out a biscuit and began to eat it, listening between bites.

Before he'd finished the biscuit he heard Web come up the drive. Some of the cattle roused, and Temp went to the door to

the wagon house and listened. Presently he heard steps and then the squeak of a door and knew they'd gone out through the milk room. Tiptoeing quietly back through the barn, he let himself out the rear door. It seemed almost as black outdoors as it had been in the barn and house. The stars were so high and dim that even the nearer trees in the orchard were no more than darker shadows. He couldn't see the boys at all, but he could hear them. There wasn't a breath of air, no sounds of any kind in that hush before dawn, except the muffled clump of boots crossing the fields to the pasture gate.

Temp followed them. Once, in the woods, he tripped over a dead limb and was afraid they had heard him, but he concluded they were making so much noise themselves that they hadn't. Among the gray birch clumps, across the lower corner of the Plains, he lost them for what seemed minutes. He hurried, guessing at their direction, and had to take the chance of their discovering him and thinking he was the thief. The ground began to rise and he knew he was almost at the end of Saddleback. Some of their best sets were near here and he stopped and listened. A moment later he heard them coming. They must have stopped for something and had allowed him to get ahead of them.

They came by him and he could barely make out Simon's larger and Web's smaller figures. They were scarcely more than blurred shadows. He could hear the low murmur of their voices, and then their shadows parted, the smaller going on toward the ridge's eastern slope, and the larger melting into a bush above him. The ridge was low here, like a turtleback, and the old cuttings were only partly grown over. Light seemed to settle down in a slowly widening circle, turning near-by shadows into trees and stumps and rocks and bushes. Temp squatted beside a stump and watched Simon's bush.

Presently he saw Simon leave his bush at a stooping run and angle downhill, stop at another bush and peer around it. Temp looked on down beyond him. At first he saw nothing. Everything beyond the immediate pale circle of light was indistinguishable. Then he saw something moving farther down the slope. It was scarcely more than an impression of motion till he saw it move across a larger opening, and then it looked more

like a bear than a man, close to the ground and moving swiftly yet so silently that Temp doubted that it was a man.

Simon seemed doubtful himself till the thing reached the larger opening, and then he began to slip down toward it. Temp followed him, stealing from tree to bush to rock as Simon did. They all stopped, and the thing straightened up, and Temp saw it was a man with a sack on his back. The man was big, very big, and he had Ed Dow's bearlike look as he stood there peering about as if trying to locate something. Bushy whiskers hid his face but Temp didn't need to see his face to know he was Ed Dow.

Simon was about halfway between Dow and Temp, standing behind a pine tree, and he startled Temp by lifting his ax and knocking off a dead branch. Dow whirled at the crash. Simon blew like a deer and thumped his ax on the ground, once, twice, three times, and blew again more faintly. Dow turned as if satisfied that it was a deer and moved on again at his crouching gait.

It came to Temp then, that Simon was signaling to Web, and he stole after Simon again as Simon stalked Ed Dow. They moved eastward around the end of Saddleback. The ridge was narrow there and dipped down to a large spring, the source of a brook that curled through the woods to the southeast and finally emptied in Deadwater Stream. Mink and coons fished the spring and the brook for trout and mussels till the ice was too thick to break, and rabbits were thick enough along the brook to make it good hunting for foxes.

Simon had been closing the distance between himself and Dow, and now he began to move more slowly and with greater caution. Temp looked ahead and saw that Dow had come to the spring and was standing there, listening. Then Dow dropped the sack from his shoulder and took a short club from it and went to the bank of the spring. He stooped, and Temp saw his arm rise and fall and heard the faint thud as he struck. There was a faint clink and jingle of metal and Simon stepped forward. Dow rose with a long, glossy, dark brown mink.

"Drop it," Simon said. He was within twenty feet of Dow, and Temp was no more than that far behind him.

Dow jerked to a bearlike crouch, his arms bowed and tense.

Slowly he straightened, peering at Simon. Then he laughed, and his voice rasped malevolently. He held up the mink and looked at it, and laughed again.

"Drop it?" he snarled suddenly. "It'll take more'n a squirrel-blooded Thurston t' make me drop it!"

Simon half raised his ax and took a quick step toward Dow. Then he stopped and the ax slipped from his fingers to the ground.

"Eyah, ye better stop," Dow sneered. "Squirrel blood! Scairt t' fight—jest like your ol' man. He paid three hundred dollars t' keep out the war!" Dow's mouth looked like a crooked scar as he sneered. "Squirrel blood. Eyah, big as ye are, ye know I could tear ye t' pieces, an' ye ain't got the——"

He broke off short and backed away from Simon's lunging rush. His arm went back and came forward viciously. But he struck too slowly. His arm came down on Simon's shoulder and the club flew from his hand. An instant later he was on his back, his head down the bank of the spring, and Simon astride him pounding his face.

Temp saw it all through a reddish haze. His ears throbbed as if the drums were about to break. He felt numb and a little sick, as if something had been torn out of him by the roots. Squirrel blood. Simon——!

Dow let out a strangled cry. It partly cleared Temp's vision and he saw Web jump down the bank of the spring and stoop over.

"He'll stand killin', all right," Web said. "But you don't want t' do it. Come on, get off him."

Simon stood up slowly, and Web said, "Grab a-hold an' haul him out o' here."

Simon bent over obediently, caught Dow by the legs and backed away from the spring. Dow slid up over the bank like a huge sack of meal. Simon dropped his legs and Dow rolled to his side and coughed. Simon stood there looking down. Then he gave his head a shake, as if he were just coming out of a daze, and went over to a gnarly yellow birch and sat down with his back against it and put his hands to his face.

Web picked up his gun and came back to Dow. "Get up," he

said, and urged him with the toe of his boot. Dow got to his feet and backed away fearfully, his eyes fixed on Web's gun.

"You ain't even had a sample," Web rumbled, "of what ye'll get if ye ever show up around here again. Now get goin'. An' keep a-goin'!"

Dow headed for the Falls road, half running, and stumbling as he looked back fearfully over his shoulder. Web watched him till he was out of sight and then turned to Simon. Temp waited a moment and, when Web was close to Simon, backed away under cover of a low-spreading fir. He continued under cover until he was out of their sight and hearing, and then made for the road after Dow.

Presently he heard Dow, crashing like a moose ahead of him, and a little later he saw him. He followed Dow to the road, and called to him sharply:

"Stop!"

Dow gave him a frightened look and broke into a run down the road.

"Don't ye never come back," Temp cried after him, "or I'll blow your head clean off!" He got out the derringer and fingered it, half inclined to send a parting shot after Dow. He would, he told himself, if Dow stopped running; but Dow didn't stop; he kept on at a shambling run till the trees pinched off the road behind him.

Temp dropped the derringer back in his pocket and started up the road toward home. He turned in at the Plains road and made his way around through the pasture and field to the orchard, as he didn't want Cora to know where he'd been and it was late enough now for her to be up. The sun was just rising as he reached the barn. From the lowing of the cattle and the rattle of tie chains he knew that Wash was getting down hay. He didn't want to talk to Wash and he went around to the milk-room door. Nesting the six shiny pails together, he took them back to the barn, waited till Wash's back was turned and hurried across the floor to the tie-up.

Ever since Dow's accusation, Temp's mind had been on Simon. "Squirrel blood," Ed Dow had said, and it looked as if Simon had believed it. Temp did his chores automatically. He

felt queerly hollow and weak. He didn't want any breakfast; he didn't want anything except to be by himself, but he knew Cora would be anxious if he didn't go in.

Wash carried in the last of the milk, and Temp got his outer coat from the tie-up door where he'd hung it. Its sagging pockets reminded him of the derringer and the uneaten biscuits and ham. He hid the derringer and flask on the beam over the door and threw the biscuits and ham to the hogs.

Cora looked up from the stove and smiled when he came in the kitchen. He tried to smile back at her and went to the sink. He could feel her eyes following him and, when he finished drying his face and hands, he saw her looking at him again. It annoyed him that she always seemed to know when something was wrong, and before she could ask any questions, he said:

"I guess I better have some sody; my stummick ain't feeling right."

The questions in Cora's eyes cleared away and she smiled. "Well," she said, "I knew there was something wrong. You forgot to lay the fire, and you do look a little peaked."

He drank some coffee on top of the soda and got away to the barn as soon as he could. Squirrel blood! Those words of Dow's and the picture of Simon sitting there with his face in his hands were unendurable to Temp. He couldn't explain that it was Cora who had hired Arty Coulter to take his place in the army. It wouldn't help the fact, in Simon's eyes, that money had saved him from going to the war. And Simon——

Temp shut his teeth on a groan. It didn't strike him as strange that the value he set on Simon's opinion meant so much to him. And overshadowing that was his own feeling for Simon. It all traced back to Simon's father whose effect on Temp's and Cora's lives had been scarcely more than a swift and vivid impact; as if some Viking immortal had come and gone in a whirlwind, leaving his likeness in a lusty son; and the son, so different from other children, had grown upon Temp, assuming proportions almost godlike.

The past ten years had very nearly closed the gap between fact and fancy, very nearly completed, in Temp's mind, his substitution for Simon's real father, given security to his pride in hav-

ing Simon considered as his son; and now the fancy was shattered and he found himself face to face with the fact.

There was only one thing for him to do, but he shrank from it; he even doubted that he had the courage to carry it through. But as the hours went by he found there was no getting away from it, and long before the boys came home he had reached the point where he was anxious to get it over with.

Temp tried to busy himself about the barn and yard with odd jobs, but he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing; he had to have something more strenuous to occupy him and he yoked the oxen to the cart and hauled dressing out to the corn piece, knowing all the while that most of its richness would be lost on the frozen ground.

Every little while he looked toward the woods. Dinnertime came and he managed to eat something.

"You better take it easy this afternoon," Cora told him. "And you might just as well wait till spring to spread that dressing, anyhow. There isn't a thing to be done that can't wait till next week and a rest'll do you good. Emma Luce is having the Circle this afternoon, and Sarah's asked the children to come over and play with Freem and Debby, so you can stay right here and be quiet."

"Eyah, might be a good thing," Temp agreed, but he had no idea of keeping quiet. It was just the opposite that he needed; something to work off the restlessness that was burning him up inside. He went over to his rocker and sat back and closed his eyes, and it seemed forever before the dishes were done and things put away and Cora and the children were ready to leave. He watched them go and then went back to the barn and paced back and forth on the floor. From time to time he stopped at the rear door and looked out across the fields for the boys. When he finally saw them coming he had a mixed feeling of shock and relief. His restlessness was suddenly gone, burned out, leaving him weak and shaken at the prospect so immediately before him.

Web's presence helped to steady him. Web would probably stay till suppertime—even longer from the look of the sack, if they skinned out their catch this evening. Simon had the heavy sack slung over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing at all. They

walked silently, heading for the milk-room door, and Temp hurried to the house and watched through a kitchen window. As they came closer, Temp could see a change in Simon's expression; the exuberant look was missing and his eyes seemed tired.

A twisted look came over Temp's face and he retreated quietly to his and Cora's bedroom. The milk-room door squeaked open and shut, boots clumped and there was a slithering sound that Temp recognized as the tarpaulin being spread on the floor. Then he heard Web say:

"Gorry, if I ain't left my skinn' knife t' home. I'll be back time you've got the fire goin' good."

Steps came to the back entry and went on outside and a moment later Temp saw Web go past the bedroom windows. A terrible weakness took hold of Temp as he sat there on the edge of the bed. Then his jaw set and he rose slowly and dragged himself to the kitchen. He heard Simon splitting kindling in the woodshed, and he waited. Simon came back to the milk room and Temp heard him open the Dutch oven fire door and put the wood on the floor. He heard Simon arrange the kindling and strike a match. The faint snap and crackle of flames reached the kitchen, the fire door closed; and then Temp went into the milk room.

Simon looked at him queerly, almost as if he were surprised. They stood there looking at each other. Temp's mouth opened but he couldn't say a word, and Simon seemed to be having the same trouble. Simon's jaw slued sideways and straightened as he swallowed. His mouth widened, but it wasn't a smile.

"Well," he said huskily, "we—we caught that feller."

Temp nodded. "I see ye," he said, and his voice sounded as if it belonged to some one else.

Simon's eyes widened. "You—you mean you—was there?"

"Eyah. I follered ye. I was scairt he might do something to ye, but I never looked fer what he done. I wa'n't more'n a rod behind ye when he started talkin' and I—I——" Temp's voice trailed off to nothing, stilled by Simon's stricken look. Then he burst out hoarsely, "Don't take it like that. The'—the' ain't any need fer it! No matter if I did git out of goin' to the war, ye ain't got a drop of my blood in ye—no squirrel blood! I ain't your pa, Simon."

Simon's expression changed to amazement, incredulous amazement. "You ain't my—my pa?" he whispered.

"No," Temp told him, and shivered. "Your ma was married to another feller before she married me; a big feller, and you're growin' to look just like him. He run a loggin' crew in the woods upriver from Wateegan, and he——" Temp caught himself on the point of telling about Hastings' money, and there was no call for telling it. "His name," Temp went on dully, "was Simon Hastings; and that's your name. So ye don't have to—have to take any shame from thinkin' I'm your father."

"Oh-h," Simon cried out. Tears suddenly ran down his face. "Why did you tell me—why did you tell me!" It wasn't a question, it was cry of protest. "You're the only pa I ever want!"

"But ye—I didn't want ye—ye mean ye don't take no shame from me?"

Simon shook his head. "No-o!" he wailed. "Oh, gorry!—It was me! I just got so mad. I—I didn't know what I was doin', and I like to killed that feller. It just—oh, I don't like to get mad like that; I want to know what I'm doin'!" Simon put his hands to his head. Then they dropped, and he asked, "Ain't you really my pa?"

A delightful warmth spread through Temp; it made him tingle all over. He smiled, but he had to swallow before he could speak.

"No," he said. "Your pa was Simon Hastings. But I'll be your pa in his place—just like I always been. And, Simon, don't ever let your ma know I told ye. We wa'n't to tell ye till you was twenty-one and it might be bad fer her if she knew."

Temp took a swift stride forward and put his arm around Simon. "Now don't ye take it hard about gittin' mad. Like Web said, that feller Dow was ready fer killin', and he'd of made anybuddy, that was worth his salt, just as mad as you was."

Simon's arms had gone around Temp, and now he drew in a tremulous breath. "Mebby so," he said, and his voice had a catch in it. "But I don't like it. I don't aim to ever get that mad again. It—I want to know what I'm doin'."

"Good idea," Temp told him, and patted his back. "Now you brace up. Web'll be back right soon, now, and ye don't want to let him see how ye feel."

"Oh, he knows," Simon said. He gave Temp a little hug and then let his arms fall and straightened up. "I had a bad time of it for a while this morning, but I'll be all right now. It just come to me that it was a good thing it happened because, now, I can look out that I don't get so mad that I don't know what I'm doin'."

He smiled, seriously, then the corners of his mouth quirked up a little, and Temp knew he'd soon be himself again.

Temp smiled back at him. "Eyah," he said. "It pays to take profit from what ye learn." And he wished there was some way that he could profit, himself, by what he'd just learned. If he'd only kept still till he'd learned Simon's trouble, he could have kept them both from this hurt for another four years. Simon was young and would get over it soon, but himself—his pose as Simon's father for sixteen years had grown almost to reality for himself; and now he knew that the pride he had taken had been a false pride, and it made him feel mean and small. The feeling was worse than his sense of loss, and the loss of his strangely personal pride left a hole in him too big to be filled—not even by the newly discovered extent of Simon's love.

Temp thought he had made but one mistake that day, but he made another, and like the first, its discovery came too late.

15

TEMP'S second mistake was in thinking that Cora should be kept from knowing what he had told Simon about his father. It might have been rectified at any time during the next few years, but Temp didn't realize it, and Cora never learned that Simon knew of her first marriage and the man who was his father. She sensed that something had happened to both Simon and Temp. They seemed subdued; but she had no idea there was any connection, as they had told her nothing about Ed Dow. They had made it a habit to keep such things from her, even smaller things, like the robbing of the traps, as they knew the least excitement wasn't good for her.

She had come to the realization of this herself, and it made her apprehensive. She tried not to worry over the indefinable change in Temp and Simon. Neither would admit there was anything wrong, but she felt that each was keeping something from her. It was like a weight in her breast and, a few days later, when Simon's zest returned to normal, she was only partly relieved. While Temp seemed to be eating and sleeping well and just as strong as ever, the spark that put the twinkle in his eyes and gave the dry turn to his speech was missing. It set her to thinking.

The result of her thought was a letter to Simon. She chose a time to write it when the children were away and Temp was off with Aussy. She told Simon about her marriage to his father, about the money he had left and the timber Temp had bought with it; and she told him about her marriage to Temp and their moving to the new farm at Council Rock; the only things she

didn't tell him were about the Bible and how his father had died. And she gave as her reason for writing the letter the fear that neither she nor Temp might be alive to tell him these things, as they had decided, on the day he came of age.

It was a long letter. She read it through carefully, sealed it and wrote instructions on the envelope for it to be delivered to Simon in the event of her death. She was putting it away in her bureau drawer when she heard a board squeak in the kitchen. She glanced through the door and caught her breath.

"Why, Parker! I—I thought you were at the Grants'?" she said.

He shook his head and dropped his eyes furtively. "I been lyin' down—readin'," he said.

"I guess you mean sleeping, don't you?"

A sly look came into his eyes and he nodded. "I guess so."

"Why can't you ever tell the truth? I don't know what's to become of you—you're even too lazy to play!" Cora's voice had a wailing note of both concern and resignation. She had never understood this grossly furtive son of hers. He was so completely different from her other children.

"Oh, go outdoors. You've been in the house all day and you need some fresh air," she said.

She closed the drawer and came into the kitchen and pushed him out the back-entry door and closed it. He took a step or two and stood there. There was no warmth in the late afternoon sun and the air was cold; but Parker stood there in his shirt sleeves without the least discomfort. His face lost none of its damp, overheated look and he didn't even put his hands in his pockets. Presently his eyes shifted, slanting along the house, and he bent his pudgy body forward and waddled heavily along beneath the kitchen windows. When he came to Cora's and Temp's bedroom he raised his head slowly, very slowly, till his eyes were above the window sill and peered with acquisitive curiosity at the drawer where Cora had hidden the letter.

Writing the letter lightened the load on Cora's mind and she lightened it further the next day by telling Ida. She didn't tell Ida what was in the letter or whom it was for; merely that she'd left it in her bureau drawer for delivery after her death.

"It's just a sort of will," she said, and smiled brightly.

Ida regarded her anxiously. "You ain't got a feelin' that you—that you might——?"

"Die soon?" Cora finished for her. "No," she said, still brightly. "Today I feel as if I might live forever. It was something I've been putting off, something I knew I had to do; and now I'm glad it's done."

The Sunday afternoon church service was just over and they were standing by the steps, alone for the moment. A shout of laughter called their attention to a group of young people. The group opened suddenly and Cora saw Simon sitting in a solid-wheeled child's wagon and Web tugging at the handle. Then she saw Alice Gregg, who had married Otis Wick's son, Lester, running toward the wagon, and Lester, with their baby in his arms, grinning a little anxiously behind her.

"Here, you big lummox," Alice laughed, "get out o' that wagon before you bust it down!"

Web let out a rumbling laugh and Simon dropped his feet to the ground and stood up grinning.

"Web said he used to haul me in a wagon like that before I could walk," Simon said. "We just thought we'd try it out, but it don't work very good."

"I should think it wouldn't," Alice cried. She took the handle and pulled the wagon to her and pushed it away, trying it. "Goodness," she said. "It's a wonder it ain't a wreck, but I guess it's all right."

"Sure it is; I built it stout," Lester declared, but there was relief in his voice.

It took Cora back through sixteen years and she recalled that Simon had been so big even then that Web couldn't pull him uphill. Simon and Web: it had been a strange companionship when the difference in their ages was so marked, but she knew it was due to the magnetic quality, the glowing virility, the buoyancy of spirit, that were so noticeable in Simon even before he could walk. And these characteristics had become only more pronounced.

Children hung around him at school and at church. Boys, even older than himself, sought his opinions and strove to have

him look upon them with favor. But Simon treated them all alike; he saw no significance in the way they looked up to him. He was simply one of them, no better, no worse, ready for any sort of fun no matter by whom suggested. And if his appearance added more life to whatever they might be doing, he joined them with too much wholeheartedness to notice it. But his enthusiasms never carried him away. They were governed by a sense of balance, a sense of fairness and of the fitness of things.

His contemporaries became aware of this, that there were limits that had better be respected, or at least observed. And they came also to recognize and accept the fact that on Saturdays and holidays, and after four o'clock on school days, Simon and Web would strike off somewhere alone. Everybody seemed to take this for granted, as the natural evolution of a friendship that had begun before Simon could walk. Nor did Simon and Web give it a thought. They were simply sufficient unto themselves.

And if Simon had come to assume the leadership, he was altogether unconscious of it. Even as a little boy he sometimes had the appearance of standing on a hilltop, surveying things in general, or some particular question, with an air of mature consideration, almost of detachment, as if he belonged, without knowing it, to a higher, more understanding order of men.

All these things Cora knew, and intuition told her how keenly Simon felt it when he had to continue so many years in school after Web had graduated. She knew he was counting the months and then the weeks and days until he would graduate, himself; and on that June morning of his eighteenth year, when she stood beside him after his Commencement exercises, she was filled with happiness for him. But when he looked back at the building that housed the school and town hall, and said, "The next time I go in there, it'll be to vote," she suffered the sharp realization that soon he would be a man in years as well as in mind and body. But her eyes glowed again when he turned to Web and grinned, his old carefree, buoyant grin that made him Simon. She looked up at the six feet five inches of him and could almost feel that she was beside his father. His mouth and chin and a certain steadiness about his eyes weren't quite

the same, nor had he the bulk of body and shoulder; but these were the only differences she could recall.

His feet executed a restrained double shuffle, and he chanted softly, "No more school! No more school!"

"Eyah," Temp said drily. "All the more time fer work."

Simon looked at him and laughed. "I dunno about that. Seems as though we'd have to stretch the days to get in more—in the summer, anyhow."

Temp's eyes twinkled, and he spit. "Like enough we kin find a way," he remarked.

"You better lay in a mess o' hoe handles, then," Simon grinned. "And fork handles, too," he added. "I'll sure wear 'em out fast if I got to hurry."

"Never you mind," Cora said to Simon. "It won't be all work."

Marvin Grant lifted shy eyes to his own big son. "Work never hurt anybuddy—in reason," he said.

Freem snickered. He was larger than his father, or his big-boned grandfather, yet he had to look up to meet Simon's eyes. "It looks," he said, "like our pas was figurin' t' get their money back on us, don't it?"

"Why, Freem!" Sarah protested, laughing.

"Well," he said. "Why not? It's the way I'd figure. But sometimes"—he grinned— "I wish Debby was a boy."

Simon glanced at Debby and felt an unaccustomed flicker of interest. She and Susan stood together, their arms about each other. Debby had on a longer dress than usual and her hair was done up. It struck Simon that she had suddenly become as mature as Susan, and she was more than two years younger, not yet fourteen. She flushed under his look and her eyes wavered and dropped.

"Gorry!" Simon said. "I never saw four people that looked so much alike."

"Who?" Cora asked.

"You and Sarah, and Debby and Susan."

Cora's color heightened and her eyes sparkled. "But they're pretty," she cried. "And I'm just a—well, I know what I look like!"

"So do I," Simon told her.

Freem glanced from his mother to Cora. "Eyah," he said. "You do look alike. It ain't so much in your faces, it's just—well, kind of all over."

"You're mighty right," Web's deep voice rumbled conclusively. "The four of ye look enough alike t' be twins—two sets o' twins. I been noticin' it between you and Sary," he said to Cora, "ever since that first Sunday after you come t' town. And since Susan an' Debby started t' grow up, they——"

"Since we started!" Susan cried. Her black eyes flashed, yet there was laughter in them. "I'll have you understand, Mr. Webster Parker, that we are grown up! Quite!" she nodded and stamped her foot.

Temp looked at her with veiled pride, and grunted. "Come on," he said to Marvin Grant. "I got my fill o' foolishness fer one day."

"Hadn't we better wait for Ida and Aussy?" Cora suggested.

Temp nodded toward the hall. "They're comin' now," he said, and started off with Marvin.

"And there's another that looks like somebody else. Wash," Web said to Simon. "If he ain't the spittin' image of Temp then I never saw one."

Simon glanced at Wash who was coming toward them. "Eyah," he said, and wished the likeness went more than skin deep.

Wash came striding up behind Susan and Debby, and from the look on his face there was some sort of mischief in his mind. Simon felt a sudden annoyance and moved within reach of the girls. Wash's eyes narrowed but he kept on coming. His arms went around the girls and he pushed his face between them and leered at Simon.

"Oh, go 'way!" Susan cried, and struggled against Wash's grip.

Simon's annoyance boiled over. He reached out quickly, hooked a finger under Wash's nose and flipped it up. "Get your snout out o' there," he said.

Wash's mouth opened and then snapped shut and his fingers went to his nose. He backed away from the girls and his eyes burned at Simon.

"You lay your hands on me again," he said, "an' I'll take a club to ye." He turned and strode off after Temp and Marvin.

"Smarty," Susan called after him. Then she giggled sympathetically. "But just the same, I bet that hurt—it made the tears run right down his face."

There was reproach as well as gratefulness in the look that Debby gave Simon. She flushed again and dropped her eyes. Simon was suddenly ashamed of himself. He was glad his mother and Sarah had gone over toward Aussy and Ida. He glanced after Wash and felt a touch of admiration. The jerk he had given Wash's nose must have hurt, but Wash hadn't yipped. Simon wondered why Wash always seemed to enjoy rubbing him the wrong way, even when he knew he'd likely get hurt. It was just like the way Lester Wick's rat terrier worried Henry Locke's Newfoundland—only the Newfoundland never let on he was worried, never paid any attention to the terrier at all. It came to Simon that he might take a lesson from the Newfoundland, but he doubted that he could. "Dang his hide," he muttered to himself.

"Hey," Web said suddenly. "What you say we take Susan an' Debby upstream in the boat after dinner. Mebby ketch us a trout or two."

For a moment, Simon didn't know what to say. It had been in his mind to go upstream after dinner with Web, but with the idea of looking over their hundred-acre tract—the Christmas trees they'd bought with their trapping money. They hadn't seen it since the ice had gone out that spring and the urge was strong in Simon to look it over. He glanced at Debby and Susan. They were watching him with such eagerness that he grinned.

"Oh, please take us," Susan cried. "Please!"

Simon's grin widened. "Oh, I dunno," he said teasingly. "Let's wait an' see how we feel after dinner."

"We're going, Debby," Susan sang. "We're going, we're going!"

16

It had been Temp's suggestion that they have the Grants and Parkers for dinner on Commencement Day. "Might as well do it right," he said to Cora, and she agreed with enthusiasm.

They had platters of fried chicken, bowls of potatoes mashed with milk and butter, and more bowls of greens, dandelions and the leaves and tips of young milkweeds; they had two big pots of coffee and pitchers of milk and cream, and the plates of hot biscuits and butter were replenished time after time.

Usually Parker sat down the table from Simon, but today they were opposite each other, and his gluttony had a sort of disgusting fascination for Simon. Parker ate a chicken leg in the same way that he went after an ear of sweet corn late in August; and his face looked as if the chicken were as well buttered as the corn. Simon marveled at the pile of bones on his plate, and finally said:

"You better save some room for the shortcake, Parker."

Parker looked up in surprise and licked his mouth and grinned. A sly look came into his eyes, and he said, "Oh, I got plenty room left."

"Good Godfrey," Simon muttered, half to himself. Then, "Why, you've et twice as much as I have and I'm near full to the ears!"

Web looked across at Parker's plate. "Why," he exclaimed softly, and lifted an eyebrow at Simon. "We'll have t' take him into the fair this fall an' put him in the eatin' contest."

Parker seemed to find this unaccustomed notice flattering, and he beamed. "I dunno if I could win it," he said, "but I'd like

to try—gorry, how I'd like to try!" He looked blankly about at the sudden shouts of laughter.

"Gorry Peter," Temp exclaimed weakly when the laughter had finally subsided. "I cal'late that shook our dinners down enough so's we'll have some room fer that shortcake!"

It was wild strawberry shortcake, and after two helpings Web leaned back in his chair with a gusty sigh of repletion. "Well," he said, and patted his stomach. "I reckon, Simon, the only way we'll work this off is t' climb into that bateau and start rowin'." He turned to Susan and Debby. "And you girls better change them dresses. And," he added, "if ye ain't ready time we are, you'll likely find us sound asleep."

Wash looked from Web to Simon. "What's all this?" he demanded.

"We're goin' up the stream," Simon told him.

Wash's eyes narrowed. "Ye think I'm a-goin' to hill them potatoes all alone?"

"Why—Parker'll help you," Simon grinned.

"Him?" Wash snorted.

"Eyah, hook the mare to him and drag him between the rows," Simon said. "Feet first, he'd ought to make a right good hillin' plow."

"Simon!" Cora protested, laughing, and the others joined her. The flicker of a grin crossed Wash's face; then he turned soberly to Temp.

"How about it, Pa? Them potatoes need hillin' an' I don't figure to do it alone."

"It kind of looks like ye might have to, today," Temp told him, and added, "You'll git your turn next year."

Wash's eyes burned. "Next year! It's always next year when it comes to me gettin' any time off. I got a good mind to bust the hell out of that boat!"

"I wouldn't try it, if I was you," Simon said softly.

Their eyes met, and Wash, after a long moment, suddenly got up and left the kitchen. Simon and Web looked at each other, and Web said:

"I'll get along an' change my clothes. I'll meet ye at the boat."

"I'll go with you," Debby said, and they got up and went out.

"Better get a move on," Simon said to Susan. "I don't aim to waste much time."

Susan jumped up and ran to her room, and Simon followed her to the front of the house and looked up the road. Web and Debby were walking rapidly, but well ahead of them, Wash's long legs were carrying him at a faster pace.

"Susan," Simon called up the stairs. "Bring my old pants and a shirt along to the mill—I'll change 'em there."

He crossed the yard and road, headed down through the Parkers' field for the dam at a run. From there he took the path to the store and reached the road just as Wash came around the turn. Wash kept on coming, and Simon crossed the road to the mill yard at a leisurely walk and made his way among the piles of slabs and lumber to the dam. The bateau was tied outside the boom logs, and Simon sat down above it and waited.

He heard Wash come into the mill and clump about as if he were looking for something. Presently Wash came out on the slip and stepped down to the walkway along the dam. The three-foot stub of a broken pick pole hung like a club from his hand. It was two inches in diameter and a heavy iron ferrule with a screw point shod the end.

Wash came along the dam to within a few feet of Simon. "Get out the way," he said.

Simon looked up at him with a half-smile but didn't move.

"Get out the way," Wash repeated, and swung back the pick pole ready to strike. Simon just sat there, with the smile faintly curling his mouth. Wash looked a little baffled. He glanced down at the dam where rocks in the fill projected through the dirt. A shrewd look came into his face and he began prying with the iron end of the pole. He worked loose a rock about the size of his head, jabbed the pole into the dirt within handy reach and picked up the rock. He measured the distance to the bateau and tried to throw the rock into it.

A small geyser sprang up several feet short of the boat, and Simon said:

"I didn't think ye could make it. Looks like ye'd have to grow some first."

Wash shot a furious look at him and dug loose another rock. It was smaller, but still large enough to knock a hole in the boat. Simon rose.

"You better leave that right there," he said.

Wash snatched the rock up and then, as Simon started for him, drove it straight at Simon's face. Simon bobbed his head sideways so the rock only grazed his ear and, before Wash could reach the pick pole, he caught Wash by the arm, spun him around and his other hand seized the seat of his pants.

"This is how ye do it," Simon said. "Ye see that lily pad acrost the boom logs?" He swung Wash back and then gave him a heave. Wash sailed out, arms and legs wide like a flying frog; he sailed out over the boom logs and came down on the lily pad with a *chug*. Wash floundered about and stood up. The water was scarcely three feet deep there and he was streaked with mud from his hair to his waist.

"Your Sunday clothes, too," Simon said softly.

Wash glanced down at himself. It was the only notice he paid to Simon. Without a word he waded into the mill pond and swam across to the slip. He climbed out on the slanting planks and started up them to the mill. Suddenly he stopped, as if struck by an idea, and he faced about and began to undress, and stripped himself down to his gleaming white hide.

"You better put them pants back on," Simon called to him. "Susan an' Debby'll be here in a minute!"

Wash leered at him. "Come an' make me!"

Simon came up into the mill and looked up the road. The girls were coming down by the box shop, Susan with his clothes over her arm. He wondered where Web was, and at that moment Web's head appeared at the lumber chute.

He grinned at Simon. "I see ye leggin' it acrost the dam, so I didn't hurry," he said. "Where's Wash?"

"Out on the slip," Simon told him. "He's got all his clothes off, dryin' 'em out."

Web chuckled. "Got himself wet, did he?"

"Kind of," Simon grinned. Then his annoyance returned. "Dang the critter—the girls can't help seein' him till we get up around the bend!"

Web came up to where Simon stood and looked down at the slip. "Why, where——?" he made a sudden leap for the dam walkway and ran along it, with Simon at his heels. Wash had slid himself into the water and was swimming noiselessly toward the bateau. He had almost reached the boom logs when Web and Simon saw him, and they barely got to the bateau ahead of him. Simon ran out on the boom logs, untied the painter and shoved the bateau shoreward to Web.

Wash stood up in the shallow water. "Now, dang ye, take it!" he said, and, scooping his hands, sent streams of solid water all over Simon.

Simon hesitated between jumping in after Wash and making a run for the bank. He remembered the mud on the bottom and decided he'd better save his clothes; but halfway ashore, Wash stopped spraying water on him and reached for the bottom. He came up with handfuls of mud, and Simon's back was plastered with clots from head to heels before he reached the shore.

Wash laughed. "Your Sunday clothes, too," he mimicked, and reached for more mud.

Simon and Web backed out of range, and Wash proceeded to throw it in the bateau, daubing the seats and gunwales and bottom. Web had been snickering and Simon had had to grin, too, but seeing the mud rain into the bateau wasn't so amusing.

"Hey, quit it!" Web called.

"What's the matter?" Susan asked. The boys turned. She and Debby were down below them and already starting to climb the embankment.

"Don't come up here," Simon said. "Wash ain't got a stitch on him."

"For goodness sake!" Susan looked aghast, and Debby flushed.

Simon said to Web, "You take 'em up around the bend. I got to get these clothes clean, anyhow, and I'll ketch Wash and make him clean out the boat. I'll row up and meet ye around the bend and put on my dry pants and shirt up there."

He sat down and pulled off his boots and stockings, and Web went down to the girls and took them around the end of the dam and behind the lumber piles upstream toward the bend. Simon started gingerly down the bank in his bare feet. Wash was wait-

ing for him with both hands full of mud, and leering expectantly. He stood at a crouch, which brought a fresh supply of mud within quicker reach; his right arm went back and seemed to stiffen there, and a peculiar look came over his face. He seemed to be straining against something, something that was painfully doubling him up, bending him over farther and farther. It wrung a grunting cry from him as his face touched the water.

It had happened in the space of three or four breaths and Simon stood there wondering what Wash was up to; but at Wash's cry, he leaped to the log boom and ran out on it. Wash's head had gone under when Simon reached him and jerked him out by the hair. Wash sucked in a half-strangled breath and coughed. His legs were folded up against his stomach in a rigid cramp and his slippery skin made him awkward to hold. Simon got his arms under him and tilted his pointed buttocks in the air to drain out what water there might be in him.

Wash coughed a few times and then breathed more easily. Tremors were running through him and forced a moan between his clenched teeth. Simon knew the pain must be bad and he hurried ashore with Wash and knelt down in a grassy spot with Wash's head and shoulders on his knees. Working a hand down between Wash's legs and body, Simon rubbed at the knotted muscles around his stomach and groin.

It made Wash's breath come in hissing gasps but under the hot sun and the rubbing he began presently to relax. He put his hands against his knees and pushed. His face was gray and his lips were tight against his teeth but he kept on pushing, and slowly his legs straightened out. Simon rubbed them as well as his stomach, catching them and pushing them back when they jerked up, again and again, against his stomach.

Wash made several attempts to sit up and, after some fifteen minutes, succeeded. Simon looked down at him, and said:

"You better take it easy."

Wash grunted. "I'm all right, now. If you're goin' upstream, ye better get goin'."

Simon got to his feet. "It looks," he said, "like folks was right about not goin' into the water right after you've et. You better remember that."

Wash grunted again and gave him a tight-lipped leer.

"Anyway," Simon said, "ye better keep dry the rest of today."

"Oh, get goin'," Wash snapped at him. "Get the hell out of here an' leave me be!"

An impulse seized Simon to turn Wash over his knee and spank his bare behind, and it was only with reluctance that he turned toward the bateau. It was a sight, but it wouldn't take long to clean it. His shirt was dry but his pants were still soggy and a little more water wouldn't hurt them. He gathered several handfuls of long grass and waded out. He tipped the heavy bateau over, filling it with water, scrubbed the seats and gunwales and bottom with the grass and pushed it over to the log boom. He got up on the boom and pulled the bateau after him. When it was balanced on the boom he tipped the muddy water out and slid it back into the mill pond.

Wash was lying in the grass when Simon went to the locker under the mill and got the oars. There were two sets of oars and pins and Simon had put them in the boat before he remembered his boots and socks. He had to pass close to Wash to get them, and Wash's eyes slanted toward him and then away. Simon got his boots and socks and returned to the bateau. Wash sat up, but neither spoke, and Simon pushed off and rowed up around the bend.

"You must of had a time ketchin' him," Web remarked.

Simon nodded a little grimly. "Slipp'ry critter," he said. "Chuck me them pants," he said to Susan. "These are kind of wet and it won't take me a minute to change."

He took the dry pants behind a bush and was back in little more than a minute. Then he put on his socks and boots, and grinned a little.

"I'd hate to get my feet wet," he said.

The bateau was four years old and a product, along with the oars, of Web's and Simon's handicraft. It was sixteen feet long, narrow prowed and square sterned, and its four-foot beam gave it considerable stability. Web got in the bow and Simon amidships and they backed the stern to the shore for the girls to get in. This distribution of weight gave the bateau a nice balance and the water curled gurgling from the bow as the boys sat back on the oars.

From the bend above the mill pond the stream ran straight for

half a mile to the second bend, which was known as the "ice hole." It was where Aussy had got his ice when he'd tried to start a creamery business after the market for his starch had dwindled to the point where it failed to pay.

"I wish," Web said, as they made the turn into the broad deep stretch, "I had a nickel for every cake of ice I've sawed an' lugged out o' there."

"Eyah," Simon agreed, "we could buy us a dozen more acres."

Above the "ice hole" the stream took a winding course through meadows of blue-joint and coarse marsh grass, with here and there a wedge of higher timbered land pushing out to the water's edge. Around nearly every bend they startled something; a pair of black ducks, quacking and spatting the water with their feet in their haste to rise; a great blue heron that went into the air with a clownish hop and made off on leisurely wings; a flock of bobbing sandpipers that flew shorter and shorter distances ahead and finally let the bateau go by, bobbing and peeping and watching it with bright round eyes; and always there were muskrats, splashing in the marsh grass and swimming before the bateau, to dive with a faint plop just before it caught up with them.

"Gorry," Simon said. "I never see so many rats. If they was only worth something!"

"If they was worth a nickel apiece," Web chuckled, "we could buy up dang near the whole county. But what would anybuddy want with a rat skin?"

Susan turned her head slightly and opened her mouth, listening. "Who's building a fence up here?" she asked.

"A fence?" Simon shook his head. "Nobody."

"Well, you listen."

Simon and Web rested on their oars. Presently the sound of a hardwood mallet striking the top of a hardwood stake rang out, once, twice, three times, each blow preceded by a sort of coughing grunt. Simon and Web laughed. Susan and Debby looked puzzled. Then Susan cried:

"It's a meadow hen—is it?"

Simon nodded, and Susan laughed excitedly. "Oh, let's find him! I've never seen one when he was driving a stake. Have you, Debby?"

Debby shook her head and hugged her knees. "Can you find him, Simon?" she asked.

"Why, I guess so. Where you reckon he is, Web—over back o' them alders?"

"Eyah. We can row up t' the end of 'em an' look acrost."

They rowed upstream a little way and nosed the bateau through a tangle of lily pads and button bushes to where they could see around the end of the strip of alders. Web took off his hat and raised his head slowly. Then he beckoned, and whispered:

"You'll have t' come up here. But don't make no noise."

Simon steadied the girls past him. Debby held his hand and pulled him after her. "Don't worry about tippin' over here," he said. "The boat's solid on the bottom."

"But I want you to see, too," she said, and drew him closer.

"Sh-h-h," Web whispered. "An' don't raise up too quick."

Their heads rose slowly. After a moment Debby looked blankly at Simon.

"Where is he?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I don't see him, either," Susan whispered.

Web chuckled. "That rat house over there—around ten rods. He's just this side of it, right in line."

"Oh, I see him! See him, Debby?"

Debby nodded and clutched Simon's hand. "There, he's—oh-h-h!" she giggled.

The meadow hen's slate-gray-brown body moved. He seemed to reach for something just above his head. Then his long thick neck curled and his head came down with a grunting, retching sound, followed by the sharp ringing crack of hardwood striking hardwood. The girls were convulsed, and even Web and Simon snickered.

"Why," Susan gasped, "he acts just like he was sick to his stomach! I sh'd think he'd hurt himself. He-e-e-e——" her shoulders shook again. "He looks like he was trying so hard. But how does he do it—that noise like he was driving a stake?"

"Dang if I know," Web answered. "Must do it with his bill. But how he can snap it together that hard is more'n I can figure."

"But what's he do it for?" Debby wanted to know.

"I guess it's just the way he sings," Simon told her. "Well, if you girls have seen enough, let's get goin'."

"I thought the trout wouldn't bite when the sun was so high," Susan said.

"It won't make any diff'rence about it today."

"Why not?"

"We forgot to bring any fishin' rig."

Susan glanced about the bateau. "Oh, dear," she exclaimed. "Of all the sillies!"

The meadow hen cut short his unmusical contortions with a startled croak. He hopped into the air like his more attenuated cousin, the great blue heron, and made off in clumsy flight, leaving such matters as folding up his neck and trailing his legs for later attention.

Web chuckled. "I wisht I had my rifle."

"You wouldn't shoot him?" Susan protested.

"Hell, no—they're too much fun alive. But I'd sure make some lead zip past his ear. When they're scairt like that, they'll dodge when they hear a bullet. And then the fun starts. I've made 'em turn somersets an' had 'em tryin' t' fly upside down—legs and wings an' neck all stickin' out an' floppin' around like he was tryin' t' head six ways t' once. Remember that'n, Simon, that flew square into a brown ash stub on the bank an' fell in the stream on his back?"

Simon grinned. "I can hear him snappin' his ol' bill yet."

"What did he do that for?" Debby asked.

"Mad; nothin' else but mad. He'd of jumped a bobcat right then."

Simon led Debby back to the stern. The pressure of her firm little hand disturbed him in a vague way, and he felt relieved when she let go his fingers.

"What'll we do?" Susan asked.

"How'd ye like to see our timber lot? We can make it up there an' back by chore time if we shove along."

"Oh, let's!" Debby said.

Simon grinned at her. Then his mind ran on to that hundred acres of thick fir and spruce and pine and hemlock. "Like hair on a dog," he thought, and the picture of it hung like a curtain between him and Debby.

17

THAT summer after his graduation, Simon discovered that Web had acquired a failing. Nearly every Sunday afternoon when the weather permitted, and every once in a while on Saturdays, Web would suggest that they take Susan and Debby with them. It irked Simon. He was perfectly willing when they were going on the stream; they could go just as easily and quickly with four in the boat as they could with two. And he was more than willing, when winter came, to take the girls skating or sliding down Crockett hill on a bobsled at night; that was fun to be enjoyed in a crowd. But having them tag along in the woods was a different matter; it was a nuisance.

"What ye want them along for?" he asked Web once.

Web chuckled. "It's good for our souls, mister. If we'd of kep' on the way we was headin' we'd of forgot the' was such things as females in the world."

"We never forgot to go home for supper, did we?"

"You would—if I hadn't been along. You forget about everything else when you're in the woods. Give ye a sight or a smell of 'em and you're clean gone. You're gettin' one-sided and it's time ye got balanced up some."

Simon grinned. "If you're figurin' to balance up the woods with girls, you got a sizable job on your hands."

"Oh," Web drawled, "I cal'late two'll be plenty. One for you and one for me."

"What ye want 'em for?"

"Why, I kind of like it; Susan, anyways. An' Debby's a right nice girl, too."

"Around the house, mebby. But girls and the woods don't mix."

Web chuckled. "Shucks, give 'em a little more time an' they'll know dang near as much about the woods as we do."

"Eyah, mebby they would; but they'd still be girls and you're welcome to the both of 'em."

Web looked so disappointed, that Simon said quickly, "Don't you," and smiled. "A whole flock of girls wouldn't plague me half as much as seein' you look like that. You bring 'em along any time ye feel like it—one of 'em or the both of 'em." He looked at Web with a puzzled squint. "But I don't see how ye get any fun just out of havin' a girl around."

Web's deep chuckle seemed to roll up from his shoes. "Ye will some day," he said.

But even when Simon could look back some fifteen months to that first trip upstream with Susan and Debby, he still failed to understand Web's interest in girls. It was September again, the second September since his graduation from school, and Simon was thinking about the girls as he followed the wagon, throwing in shocks of corn to be stored in the barn cellar. It was Saturday, and on Sunday afternoon he and Web were taking the girls upstream. It had been two weeks since the girls had been out with them and Simon had begun to hope they'd had enough. Now he sighed.

Fall had arrived almost overnight and the clear crisp air was in his blood. The woods called to him. Fine dust from the corn filled his nose and throat, but he smelled pine needles and balsam. The rattling shocks and the saw-edged leaves that brushed his face were the snapping of underbrush and the stinging branches of a hardwood thicket. And tomorrow, when he longed to strike out in the woods with Web and walk and walk and walk, he had to sit in a boat and row upstream with Debby and Susan.

He caught up a shock and heaved it a little too hard. It struck the farther rail of the wagon and fell off on the other side.

"Hey," Wash yelped. "What the hell ye tryin' to do?"

Simon cut around back of the wagon. Wash was sitting on the ground with the shock across his knees. Simon picked up the

shock with one hand and Wash with the other and heaved them both in the wagon.

"Don't talk so much," he said, and went back to his own side of the wagon.

Wash came hurtling out of the wagon at Simon, feet first. Simon sidestepped, and Wash hit the ground and sprawled. Temp was driving the oxen and now he came back.

"That's enough," he said to Wash. "We got work to do." He motioned with his goad-stick. "Git around on your side an' stay there."

Wash gave him a hot look and stamped around the wagon.

Once across the cornfield and back filled the wagon, and by late morning the barn cellar was full. The last few loads would have to go on the main barn floor, against the hay bays opposite the tie-ups, and Temp swung the oxen wide, around the garden, to give them a straight pull. He let them breathe before starting them up the runway to the rear door. Simon stopped at the wagon's tail. His eyes wandered out to the root garden, behind the sheep shed, where Parker followed two rows of carrots on his hands and knees. He had been there most of the morning and his basket wasn't filled yet.

"The meechin' woodchuck!" Simon thought. "Why don't he stand up and pull 'em like a man?"

The oxen surged forward, and Simon put his hands against the wagon and gave it a boost up the incline. He felt the need to exert himself and he leaned into it. The wheels struck the level floor and he kept on pushing, running the wagon up on the oxen till Temp stopped them at the middle of the barn.

Simon climbed up and lowered the shocks, and Temp and Wash stacked them away. Simon followed the last one to the floor, wrinkling his nose and blowing out the dust. He saw Parker waddling up the incline with his partly filled basket and didn't try to conceal his feeling of disgust. Parker wasn't so fat as he was beefy, and Simon attributed his peculiar gait to sheer laziness. He was larger than either Temp or Wash, and Simon knew he was stronger, but he always managed to secure the lighter work for himself, or work that he could do alone. His heavy face always had a damp look, in winter as well as summer,

and he had learned to hide the greedy slyness of his eyes behind an opaque blankness.

He leaned against the door, and remarked in his ingratiating manner, "Almost time for dinner, ain't it?"

"Dinnertime," Wash exclaimed. "Kay-ryst! My belly's been rubbin' my backbone for the last half hour!"

Temp grunted and looked at his heavy silver watch. "Time to git the rest of it in," he said. "And you, Parker"—he tossed a basket down the floor—"you fill both them baskets before you come in fer dinner!"

A hurt look came over Parker's face. Then his mouth sagged still farther open and he stared out the barn toward the dooryard. "Who's that?" he asked, as the others turned.

A pair of dark bay horses, ears cocked forward, were trotting lightly into the dooryard. Temp frowned. His shoulders moved with an impatient swing as his long legs carried him out of the barn. The driver checked the horses by the back-entry door and he looked toward it with a neckless movement of his red moon face and heavy body.

Susan appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. Her color was high from standing over the stove, and he looked at her appreciatively. The dimple at the corner of her mouth flickered, and he looked at her with quickened interest.

" 'Y gorry," he said, and his sandy eyebrows pulled together. "Seems as though I'd seen ye before. Ye don't come from down around Wateegan, anywheres, do ye?"

"No," she said, and nodded toward the barn. "There's Pa coming now."

His eyes lingered on her and then turned. As they fell on Temp their look of perplexity increased. All at once they brightened and his red face wrinkled with a laugh.

"Well I be go to hell," he exclaimed, "if it ain't Temp Thurston!" He whacked his thick leg. "I knowed I'd run acrost ye some time. How are ye, an' how's Cory?" He swung to Susan. "Go tell your ma an old friend from back home is here. Go on!" He laughed again and swung back to Temp. "Don't ye know me?"

Temp regarded him with smoky narrowed eyes. "Eyah," he

said, "I know ye, all right, Lafe Titcomb. What ye after here?"

"Cattle, Temp. Buyin' cattle, same as when I saw ye the last time," Titcomb chuckled. He looked about at what he could see with the minimum twisting of his neckless head and body. "So this is where ye was headin'. Well, well. How long's it been since I passed ye on the road that day ye was movin'?" Titcomb's lips pursed thoughtfully. "Why, it's nineteen years, damn nigh t' the day! Ye been here all that time?"

"Right here. And I still mean what I told——"

Wash came from the barn, and Titcomb broke in on Temp.

" 'Y Godfrey!" he laughed, and whacked his leg again. "No need t' ask who his daddy is. He looks as much like you as the girl looks like Cory." Titcomb glanced at the door, but Susan had gone in, and he turned back as Simon came from the barn.

His sandy eyebrows came together again. Then a queer expression came over his face and his chin sagged a little. He blinked and peered again at Simon, and gave his head a shake.

"Well," he said to Temp. "How many more young'n's ye got around here that looks like somebuddy else?"

"What ye mean?" Temp inquired sharply.

Titcomb's eyebrows arched and he looked quizzically at Temp. "Why," he said, "the big feller there. I thought fer a minute he was a man I used t' know come t' life agin. Looks as much like him as your boy looks like you. I used t' know him down t' Wateegan. Hastings, his name was; Simon Hastings. He was a——"

"Simon?" Wash cried. "That's his name!" He turned and pointed at Simon.

Temp's face seemed to shrivel and turn yellow from the flame in his eyes. But he seemed paralyzed, incapable of speech or motion.

Wash crouched suddenly but held his ground as Simon came leaping toward him. Simon's hand went out and sent Wash spinning. Titcomb's face was colorless as Simon came leaping toward him. But Simon's objective was not Lafe Titcomb; it was Cora, standing in the back-entry door, clinging to the casing, gasping for breath.

Simon reached her before she fell. She swayed against him

and her breast jerked convulsively. Her lips moved and her voice came to him faintly, that high thin note from the top of her throat that had always frightened him. It made him feel weak and futile, now.

"Simon, I—I——" her breast jerked again and her body went limp in his arms. Her weight was nothing to him, but his sudden weakness almost made him drop her.

"Susan!" he shouted, and turned to Titcomb. "Go get Doc Luce! Run them hosses!"

"I——" Titcomb gulped. "This here's the fust—whereabouts does he——"

"Go with him, Wash," Simon cried. "God 'lmighty! Move!"

Titcomb swung the team. Wash gave Simon a wolfish look and sprang in behind as the wagon whipped out of the dooryard.

Susan ran out with a wet towel. She opened Cora's dress and bathed her throat and face. Temp came up and stood behind Susan, a look of helpless anguish on his face. Parker waddled out of the barn. He glanced down at his mother where Simon's arms cradled her on the doorstep, and edged past them to the door. Margaret and Janice blocked the doorway, and Parker spoke to them with an impatient note in his usually fawning voice.

"Aw, quit snivelin'," he said. "She'll come out of it like she always does. Get out the way; I want a drink." He pushed between them and went in.

Susan's hands, at first so deft and steady, began to falter. Her chin, and then her shoulders, began to tremble. She looked at Simon fearfully.

"Simon," she whispered. "I—I—— Her eyes!"

Simon had been watching the road and now he looked down at Cora. Susan turned and looked up the road. "Oh, why don't they come?" she cried.

"They just crossed the bridge," Simon told her. "They'll be here in a minute."

Cora's head was low on his shoulder. He saw that her eyes were barely open. He watched them until the wagon rocketed into the dooryard and in all that time neither her eyes nor her eyelids had moved.

Doctor Luce swung from the wagon and knelt beside her. He pushed back her eyelids and peered at her eyes. His bushy white eyebrows twitched and his lips came tight together, pulling down at the corners. He took her hand, bending the fingers gently and feeling her wrist. He opened her dress and put his ear down over her heart. It seemed a long time to Simon that he listened. Then he straightened up and cleared his throat and his eyes went from Simon to Susan to Temp. His lips parted a little and the cords in his lean old neck pulled taut the slack in the wrinkled skin.

"She's gone," he said huskily.

Susan made a choking sound. Margaret and Janice ran into the house, blindly. A great numb emptiness filled Simon. He seemed to be off at a distance looking down at a strange dream. He looked at Temp; and Temp's shoulders, his whole body, seemed to have shrunk and sagged in on itself. In those few minutes Temp had become an old man. Simon's eyes blurred and a dull ache in his chest swelled until it seemed it would stifle him. His eyes dropped to his mother, to her smooth black eyebrows, the long lashes, her wide firm mouth and the delicate lines of her nose and pointed chin. His free hand went to her cheek and pressed her head against his shoulder.

Lafe Titcomb's voice struck through Simon's numbness, a bleating wail.

"Oh-h, my Godfrey!"

Simon looked up at him. He'd forgotten that Titcomb was there. The man's moon face was white about the nose and mouth and his jowls were startlingly purple. A shiver ran through him as his eyes met Simon's and he fairly lifted his horses from the ground. They came around on their hind legs. The wagon tipped as the off front wheel bit into the body iron, jerked upright, and went out of the dooryard in a skidding curve.

Simon heard the doctor yell, "Look out!"

He saw Ida coming in from the road. The horses swerved, barely missing her, and took the road to Brent's Falls on the run. Ida hurried on up the dooryard, pale and short of breath, her eyes on Cora in Simon's arms on the broad back-entry step.

Doctor Luce went heavily to meet her. Susan ran to her, and Ida took her in her arms. Presently Susan freed herself, and said:

"Hadn't we better—take Mamma—inside?"

Simon got carefully to his feet and carried Cora into her bedroom. All this time, Temp had neither moved nor spoken. Now he followed Simon and took a chair beside the bed after Simon had gently laid Cora on it. Simon suddenly had to get away, away all by himself. He hurried out, but Ida stopped him in the kitchen.

"Them young ones," she said. "Find 'em an' send 'em over t' our place, an' tell Parker t' go after Sarah an' Nelly an' get 'em here soon as he kin."

Simon found Margaret and Janice upstairs, huddled on their bed. "Ida says for ye to go over to her place and look after things," he said. "Right now."

He followed them downstairs, and located Parker in the woodshed, blubbering. He looked at him for a moment and turned on his heel and came away. It would be easier to go after Sarah and Nelly himself, and it would give him something to do.

Wash was limping in from the road. His face was white and pinched. There were brown dirt stains on his denim shirt and pants, and he carried his arms across his stomach, his right elbow cupped in his left hand.

"Where's that hog-head with them hosses?" he demanded thickly.

Simon had forgotten Wash, and now it came to him that Wash had gone with Titcomb for the doctor and hadn't returned with them.

"Where'd the son——" Wash winced as he stepped on a rolling pebble. He set his teeth together, and said between them, "Where'd he get to?"

"Down the road," Simon told him, and tilted his head toward the Falls. "What ye want with him?"

"He throwed me out comin' back around the turn. Damn his soul, he didn't have no call to drive like that!"

It began to break through Simon's numbness that Wash was hurt. "You land on your stummick?" he asked, and walked up to Wash.

"Naw-w, my arm," Wash said, and winced again. "Get out the mare. I'm goin' to ketch the——"

"Lemme see it," Simon interrupted, and took hold of the arm.

Wash jerked away. "Kay-ryst!" he yelled. "Leave it be! Get Freem to tie a board or something onto it—the ends keep grittin' together and I don't like it."

Simon went in the house and met the doctor coming out. The doctor felt the arm with gentle fingers.

"It's a square break," he said. "I'll need some splints."

Simon went to the woodshed. Parker had slipped away somewhere, and Simon picked out a twelve-inch maple chunk with a straight grain and split off half a dozen thin slabs. He took them out to the dooryard. The doctor had cut Wash's sleeve off at the shoulder and was getting it off his arm. Sweat rolled down Wash's face and he cursed between his teeth.

"Here's the splints," Simon said. "If ye need any help ye better call Susan—I got to go after Sarah and Nelly." His voice broke and his chin trembled as he finished.

Wash looked at him queerly, and then threw a startled glance at the doctor and the house. He looked back at the doctor and gulped.

"How—," he asked huskily, and gulped again—"how's Ma?"

Simon didn't wait for the doctor's answer. He hurried blindly down the dooryard and up the road to the Grants'. Usually he walked right in, but now, with his hand on the back-entry door knob, he hesitated.

"Somebody out there?" Debby called.

He couldn't answer. Debby's quick steps came to the door. She opened it and caught her breath. "Simon!" she said. "What—what is it?"

"Sarah here?" he asked.

"Eyah," she said, still looking at him anxiously. "Come in." She reached for his arm and pulled him into the kitchen. "Simon—what's the matter?"

Sarah stood at the kitchen table slowly stirring a bowl of pancake batter. She looked up, questioningly, as Simon came in; and a dull pain swelled in his chest as he saw her—she reminded him so of his mother.

Her questioning look turned to fear and she came toward him quickly.

"It isn't——?" her voice caught.

Simon heard himself say, "Ma—her heart. It's—she's gone."

Sarah's face twisted and her hands went up to her mouth.

"Oh, Simon!" Debby's whispered cry was full of heartache. Her arms went about him tightly and her slender body pressed against him. "Oh, Simon!"

He looked down on her dark head and felt something stir in his chest, as if clamps were being loosened there. He put his hands on her shoulders and pressed them gently. Then Sarah reached up and pulled down his head and held his cheek against hers. It was just such a thing as Cora might have done, and the clamps in his chest suddenly let go their hold, setting free something that wracked him and tore at his throat. His great body shook convulsively and his breath came and went in hacking gasps.

When he straightened up, the awful feeling in his chest was gone. But a dull soreness remained and he had to swallow before he could speak.

"Ida," he said, "wants you and Nellie to come over, if you can."

Sarah's face twisted again and she nodded. Then she said, "Debby, go tell Freem to go after Nelly."

Debby drew back from Simon and brushed her reddened eyes. She hurried out the back entry and Simon heard her call, "Freem!"

A few moments later, Freem galloped into view around the house and headed for the road. Simon watched him through the window and a warm lump rose in his throat. He knew he had no better friend than Freem, not even Web.

He heard Debby and her father coming along the walkway from the woodshed, Debby's light step, and the slower heavy thuds of Marvin's heels. He turned to the door as they entered, and Sarah said:

"I'll change my dress."

Marvin came into the kitchen ahead of Debby. His candid face revealed his feelings as he never could have voiced them.

"If the's anything I can do, Simon——" he paused and his mouth set queerly.

Simon could only shake his head. He glanced at Debby, invol-

untarily, as if something had pulled his eyes around. There was something in her own eyes, in her whole expression, that made him feel defensive. It reminded him of the way his mother had looked at him sometimes, and it didn't seem right to have anybody else look at him that way, not even Debby. He was relieved when Sarah came.

"I'm going with Simon," she said, and touched Marvin's arm. "Debby'll look after you and Freem."

Simon followed her out the door. She set a brisk pace and made Simon think again how much she was like his mother. He could almost make himself feel it was Cora walking beside him. His expression was like a little boy's striving to conjure into reality something he knew wasn't so.

Sarah glanced up at him and looked quickly away and dabbed at her eyes with her tightly balled handkerchief. Then she said brightly, almost cheerfully:

"Simon, who was it that went after Pa?"

Simon's eyes slanted down at her and then swung back along the road toward home. "I dunno," he said slowly. "I never saw him before. Somebody from down Wateegan way that used to know Ma and Pa."

The compassion in Sarah's eyes deepened. "I saw him drive up the road with Wash," she said. "But when he came back with Pa, Wash wasn't with them and I thought it was somebody around the Falls that was sick."

Simon smiled faintly. It was too bad that Wash had broken his arm, but he wished he could have seen him sail through the air.

"Wash fell out the wagon, comin' back around the turn," he said, "and broke his arm. He had to walk home."

"Oh-h," Sarah said. She spoke as if she were wondering what would happen next.

Wash was swearing when they entered the kitchen. He was stripped to the waist, his upper arm tightly bandaged, and Doctor Luce was binding it to his body.

"Shut up," Simon told him sharply.

Wash looked around with a snarl. His eyes dropped as he saw Sarah and his white, sweat-streaked face colored a little.

The door to Cora's and Temp's bedroom opened and Susan looked out. Over her head Simon could see Temp sitting beside the bed, bolt upright like a stone image. He turned quickly away and his eyes fell on Parker. Parker was sitting on a stool beyond the stove, his face bent over a plate on his knees, blubbering and shoveling beans and johnnycake into his greasy mouth. Suddenly Simon felt as if he couldn't breathe. He needed fresh air and he rushed outdoors.

18

NOTHING seemed real to Simon. The crowded church, the black casket banked with late summer flowers, the penetrating sweetness of petunias mingled with the rankness of marigolds, the heat generated from closely packed bodies, the Reverend Melcher's sonorous voice rising and falling in eulogy and exhortation, pressed in upon him, shackling his senses, sweeping him along in the suffocating current of a nightmare to which there was no end.

People stirred restlessly, but the Reverend Melcher's flow of words went on and on. Simon felt the pew quiver. Mechanically, his eyes traveled along it to where Wash sat at the far end. Wash's heels were set in a crack in the floor and he was straining against it. His face was a ghastly plaster-white and wet with perspiration. He was breathing heavily and his mouth was working. Suddenly he was on his feet, his left arm pointing rigidly at the preacher.

"Fer Christ' sake, ain't ye said enough?" he screamed.

The Reverend Melcher stared down at Wash and gasped, as if he'd just emerged from a sudden ducking in icy water. For a long moment there wasn't a sound in the church. Slowly the preacher's back straightened, his arms went out before him and his eyes closed.

"Forgive us," he muttered. "Forgive us our sins. Amen."

"Amen," came the response from the pews.

Feet scraped and dresses rustled as people made their way to the aisles and formed a long column. They filed slowly past the casket. Nobody looked at Wash. Nobody whispered. Al-

ready, they seemed to have forgotten his outburst. It had brought to Simon a sense of relief rather than any feeling of shock; and, deep inside him, underneath all this strangeness, he could sympathize with Wash. Just sitting there, listening, listening, had been hard enough to bear, without having the added pain of a throbbing broken arm.

When the last of the column had filed by, Wash and Susan arose. Temp still sat between them, eyes fixed straight ahead, and he came to his feet like a man in a trance when Susan took his arm. Wash and Parker followed them, then Margaret and Janice, and Simon last.

Simon stood beside his mother's coffin. She seemed so serenely herself, so very much the mother she had always been, he couldn't help feeling that she might open her eyes and speak to him at any moment. He stood there looking at her until someone touched his arm, and he heard Web say:

"They're waitin', Simon."

He put his hand on Web's shoulder and they walked down the aisle together. Together, they followed the bearers across the road to the cemetery. They stood behind Temp and Wash and Susan at the grave. The Reverend Melcher stooped to the pile of soft brown earth and let a handful trickle from his fingers to the casket down below.

"The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust." He spoke slowly, gently. Once more his arms lifted. His lips moved silently a moment, and then he whispered, "Amen."

"Amen," came the response. And presently people began to move away.

Simon could never remember just how he got home. He knew Web was with him, and he vaguely recalled Ida and Aussy and the Grants; but that was all. He and Web were deep in the woods back of Saddleback before things began to seem natural again. They were following the brook toward Deadwater Stream and Simon stopped by some tracks on a tiny spit of sand.

"Otter," he said.

"Eyah," Web answered. "Looks like we might have some good trappin' this fall."

They were the first words that either had spoken in the woods that afternoon. It seemed to be the moment that Web was waiting for, and he went on:

"Mebby we better be gettin' back—the's something you'll likely want t' see." He paused and put his hand on Simon's arm. "It's a letter that Cory wrote for ye. She told Ma about it quite a while back, and Ma forgot about it till we—till this afternoon, and she told me t' tell ye."

"A letter—she wrote me?" Simon repeated wonderingly.

"Eyah. She didn't say what it was, but she wanted Ma t' tell ye if anything happened to her."

It came to Simon suddenly what it was. "Oh," he said, and started home as if he'd been spurred. Even though he knew what was in it, he wanted the letter; it would be something she had done just for him, something he could keep and treasure.

"I guess I know what it is," he said, and told Web what Temp had told him that day they had caught Ed Dow. "So now," he concluded, "I ain't got any real folks, and if I was twenty-one I——" he stopped and shook his head. "No, I guess I ought to be glad I ain't twenty-one—I wouldn't feel right to leave Pa now."

"And that's right enough," Web said. "But don't get the idea you got no real folks; Susan an' the others have got just as much of Cory's blood in 'em as you have, and it won't make any diff'rence that Temp ain't your pa. I dunno how many times I've heard folks say how diff'rent you was from Temp and Cory, and a lot of 'em won't be su'prised at all. But ye know," he gave Simon a quizzical look, "ye don't have t' tell anybuddy else about it—not if ye don't want to."

Simon's face lit up. "Gorry, I hadn't thought o' that," he said. "The's only you and me an' Pa that knows it."

It was late afternoon when they crossed the fields to the house. The milk-room door opened and Susan ran out to them.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she cried. "Wash and Parker are—I don't know what's got into them! And Pa—" tears ran suddenly down her face—"he just sits there—like—like he didn't know anything—or anybody!"

Web held out his arms and she ran into them and pressed her

face against him. He stroked her head and smiled at Simon's wondering look. "Don't worry," he said. "We ain't told anybuddy, but we're figurin' t' get married one o' these days."

Simon stared at him. "Married?" He couldn't believe it.

Susan lifted her face and demanded, "Why not?" Then her eyes softened. "Oh, it won't make any difference between you and Web." Her eyes lifted to Web's, and she said to him, "But I'm going to be more than just a cook to you—you'll have to remember that I'm your wife!"

Web smiled at her and touched her cheek. "Better tell her about the letter?" he suggested to Simon.

"And about me and—Pa," Simon said, and smiled wistfully. "I guess I'll have to keep on callin' him Pa."

He went on to tell her what Temp had told him, and as Susan listened, her expression of shocked surprise changed to sympathy and then to a mingling of feelings that puzzled Simon, and he ended on an uncertain note.

"So I ain't rightly one o' the family, now," he said.

Susan pushed herself from Web's arms and caught the front of Simon's coat. "Don't you dare say that," she told him fiercely. "We had the same mother—and that's all that matters!" Her arms went up; she had to stand on tiptoe to lock her hands behind his neck; and she pulled his head down and kissed him. Then she unclasped her hands and caught his coat again, and said, a little diffidently, "I always wondered why you were so different. You—" she hesitated—"you'll let me—read what Mama wrote—won't you?"

Simon swallowed and nodded. "Why, sure," he said.

"I'll get it," Susan said, and Simon and Web followed her into the house.

As they came into the kitchen, Simon was relieved that, outside of the family, only Ida and Aussy were there. They were in the two rockers, Ida slowly rocking and Aussy leaning back with his legs crossed. They looked up but didn't speak. Temp was sitting in a straight-backed chair, stiffly, as if he were made of wood. His eyes had a lost look, an unblinking stare, and he seemed completely unaware of anything outside himself.

For a moment, Simon thought no one else was there. Then

he saw Wash and Parker, sitting close together in the shadow of the pantry door. Wash's face was drawn, but it struck Simon that the glitter in his eyes was from something else than pain. And Parker had a bold look, a sort of complacency, that Simon had never seen before. They reminded him of a weasel and an overgrown bear cub, and he wondered if they'd been at the cider. Something, he knew, had bolstered Parker.

Susan went to Cora's and Temp's bedroom and closed the door behind her. Parker glanced at it and then back at Simon with a faint leer. A growing tension took hold of Simon. It seemed to fill the room as they waited for Susan. Then the bedroom door opened and she stood there, pale and distressed.

"It isn't there!" she said to Simon.

Parker said in his oily voice, "If you're lookin' for a letter—for him," he jerked his head toward Simon, "ye can bet it ain't there. An' why?" He glanced at Wash and pushed out his beefy chest. "Because I see her write it an' put it away; and I got it—today!"

"Oh," Susan gasped. Then her eyes flashed, and she cried, "You sneak! You——"

"Shut your face," Wash told her.

He leaned forward in his chair, cuddling his broken arm. His lips peeled back and his eyes glittered at Simon.

"A letter," he bit the words off. "To a bastard! If she was married like she said she was, why didn't she come out with it? Why did she keel over when that hog-head drove in an' said ye looked like Simon Hastings? She was——"

"Where is it?" Simon said, and his voice had a deadly note as he looked at his two half brothers.

Neither answered; Parker shrank back against the wall, and Wash's left hand dropped into his pocket, to come out with his father's old double-barreled derringer which he leveled at Simon's stomach.

It wasn't the derringer that stopped Simon; it was Web's grip on his arm and Web's sharp whisper:

"Look at Temp!"

Simon stopped and looked. Temp had turned in his chair toward Wash, and now he was rising, slowly. His face still

had a wooden look but his eyes had lost their vacant dullness.

"Don't ye speak like that about your ma," he said to Wash. The awful flatness of his voice sent a shiver through Simon and made Wash's lips peel back again. "She was married before she married me," Temp went on. "She married Simon Hastings, down to Wateegan, and Simon, here, is their son."

Wash gulped. Then he said, "Where's the proof? The' ain't any proof in the letter." He turned to Parker. "Gimme it," he said.

Parker fumbled inside his shirt. He took out an envelope and gave it to Wash, and his eyes went furtively from Temp to Simon and back to Wash again. Wash got up and held the letter out to his father. Temp just looked at it, and Susan said:

"You want I should read it to you?"

Temp nodded, and she read the letter aloud. It told of Cora's marriage to Simon Hastings and then of her marriage to Temp. It ended in the middle of a sentence and Susan turned the pages, looking for the next.

"Why," she exclaimed, and looked about wide-eyed. "That's all there is!"

Temp looked at her, his head going from side to side, a sort of palsied movement. "Ain't the'—anything about the Bible?" he asked.

"What Bible?" Parker burst out.

Simon looked at him and saw a new, hard-eyed Parker, and back of the hardness in his eyes was greed, a greed that drove him, even to the point of overcoming for the moment his physical fear.

Susan ignored Parker. "No," she said. "It doesn't say anything about a Bible."

"I'll git it," Temp said, and started for the bedroom.

Parker made a lumbering dash after him. He had to cross the kitchen diagonally, and Simon intercepted him. Simon's hand went out in a sweeping slap that knocked Parker back into the wood box. Simon was so intent on Temp that he paid no further attention to Parker. He watched Temp stoop before the bureau and pull out the bottom drawer, saw him move some things in the drawer and take out a small package.

Then Aussy said, "Simon! Quick!" and beckoned.

Simon saw that Aussy's eyes were on something behind him, and he took a quick step forward, ducking and turning at the same time. A stick of stove wood brushed his coat and clattered on the floor. Parker stood there, his heavy face twisted with hate and his arms still outstretched from the force of the blow that had torn the stick from his hands. The hate in his eyes changed to fear as Simon straightened up and looked at him.

"Keep away from him, or I'll let ye have it," Wash said sharply.

Simon glanced at him, and then Temp came past his elbow, the old brittle oilskin about the package crackling faintly as he unwrapped it. The oilskin dropped to the floor and Simon saw the Bible. Temp opened it carefully, turning the pages till he came to the place he wanted.

"There it is," he said, and held the Bible out to Wash. "Ye wanted the proof, an' there it is."

Wash leaned forward. His eyes narrowed and his lips drew thin as he read the proof of his mother's first marriage.

Parker was edging nearer and nearer Temp and suddenly grabbed the Bible. Simon's hand went out like light and caught him by the neck, but before he could reach the Bible, Parker tossed it in Wash's lap.

"Burn it up!" he cried, and then squealed as Simon's fingers tightened.

Simon held him up by his neck and coat and shook him. Parker's arms and legs and head jerked about as if he were made of rags. He squealed like a rabbit. Simon suddenly let go of him and Parker crumpled to the floor and then crawled over beside Wash.

Simon gave his head a shake; the blind rage had almost got him again, and he shivered as he tried to get hold of himself, telling himself that he must keep his hands off Wash and Parker or some day he might recover his senses too late. He became aware that Temp was speaking to him and he blinked and saw Temp standing there, holding out the Bible to him.

"Take it!" Wash said, his voice harsh and bitter.

Simon took the Bible and felt a sort of peace steal over him.

"Now pack your things," Wash told him in the same bitter voice, "and get the hell out o' here."

Susan caught her breath, and Temp and Simon looked at Wash as if they didn't understand. Wash's eyes burned at Simon, and he said:

"Ye heard me. Pack your things and get goin'. We got no room for anybody here that ain't a Thurston."

Temp seemed to grow in stature. His eyes fixed on Wash and his voice again was awesome in its flatness. "It ain't fer you to say who lives here," he said. "This place is Simon's home, just as long as he wants to stay here!"

Wash's lips drew back again. His eyes flickered and then held steady, as he said, "Not unless ye'd rather have me go. And I'm tellin' ye right now it's either him or me—so take your pick."

"No," Simon said, and let his hand rest gently on Temp's arm. "He don't have to take his pick. You're his son, and I ain't; so I'll be leavin'." His eyes dropped to Parker and his lips curled ironically. "The farm's losin' a hand, Parker," he said, "and it looks like ye'd have to learn how to work."

Simon went to the northeast front room that he'd occupied alone for years. It took him only a few minutes to roll his things up in a bundle. He returned to the kitchen with them under his arm.

Temp looked at him and shook his head. "It don't seem right, Simon; but I cal'late ye know best." His eyes took in the bundle under Simon's arm and he went into his bedroom. He came out with a great carpetbag and set it at Simon's feet. "This here was your pa's," he said. "Your ma thought ye might like it sometime an' she kep' it fer ye."

Simon had seen the bag many times in the shadow of the closet and now, for the first time, he saw its flowered pattern in the light. The colors had faded a little, just enough to give the red of the clustered roses and the green of the leaves and the browns and yellows of the background a softened tone that made him think of late summer. Looking down at the bag he suddenly had the wish that he might have known his father. He stooped and opened the bag with a strange sort of ex-

pectancy; but it was empty and he put his clothes inside and straightened up with the two handles in his hand.

He turned again to Wash and Parker. "Ye can give me the rest of Ma's letter now," he said. "And then I'll go."

Parker shrank back against the wall and Wash looked at him questioningly.

Temp's wooden look brightened a little as he turned from them to Simon. "If the's any more to the letter," he said, "I cal'late I can tell ye what's in it. It's——" he paused and then shook his head. "No, I can't tell ye. I promised—your ma I wouldn't tell ye till ye turn twenty-one. It won't do ye any good to know till then, anyways—but don't ye let me fergit to tell ye."

He held out his hand and Simon took it. They looked at each other and Temp's head began again its palsied shaking.

"You're a good boy," he said, "and I'm goin' to miss ye. But ye can go into the woods now, and I cal'late that'll kind of make up fer leavin' home."

Simon couldn't speak. He could only nod and grip Temp's hand. Then he turned and hurried out. Susan and Web went with him, and Susan caught his arm and stopped him in the dooryard. She was pale and her eyes were red, and she could barely speak, herself.

"I—I want to go with you," she said. "I don't see how I can stand it—with Ma and you both gone. But Web says I'll have to stay—a while, anyhow, and as soon as Margaret and Janice get used to lookin' after the house, we can get married."

Simon nodded and cleared his throat. "Eyah. Pa'll need ye. I'd ought to be stayin', too. But Wash would go if I did, and he's got more of a right to stay than me. Pa's goin' to have a hard time of it till Wash's arm gets well, but the extry work'll help keep his mind off Ma." A grim little smile touched Simon's mouth and eyes. "It's kind of too bad I didn't take the time to learn Parker how to work, while I had the chance; but I cal'late Wash'll tend to him."

Simon looked at the house and ell and barn. "Well," he said, "I better get goin'. You reckon," he said to Web, "your ma'll take me in for a while, till I kind of get squared away?"

Web gave him a grimacing smile and swallowed. "Ye ain't goin' nowheres else, anyhow," he said.

19

THERE was no question in Simon's mind about what he was going to do. He was going to the woods—the big woods—and he was going soon. But he had to think about it and grow accustomed to the idea. Always he had seen himself hurrying off to the big woods the moment he was free to go; but now that he was free he found that he couldn't hurry. His mother's death and the sudden change in his outlook seemed to bring more responsibility than freedom.

He felt weighted down with responsibility, yet unable to do anything about it. It was a curious feeling and he ranged the woods for days before he shook it off. There was nothing that he could do; Web and Freem were doing all that could be done in helping Temp with the chores.

As the heaviness wore away, a rising impatience to be on his way took its place; but before he could leave there were things to be done. He wanted to do something for Web and Susan, something that would come in handy for them when they were married.

His first thought had been to deed his half of his and Web's timber lot to them. It was his dearest possession. But second thought told him it would be more of a handicap than a help, as it wouldn't be ready to cut for years and would put the added burden on Web of carrying the taxes all that time.

The Sunday after Cora's funeral, Simon and Web and Susan and Debby walked home together from church. As they passed the old Russ house, Debby said:

"I wonder when anybody'll be living there again?"

Web chuckled. "I hope nobuddy does till after Susan

and me are married. I been kind of figurin' t' hire it for us."

Simon looked at the place with sudden interest. It stood on the high side of the road under half a dozen large elms and faced east across the valley. He remembered standing in the dooryard and looking over the roof of Doctor Luce's house directly into his own and the Grants' dooryards. It was a nice place, and the way Susan was looking at it, he knew she liked it.

"Why don't ye buy it?" he said to Web.

"I would if I could, but the way Russ has got it priced it don't look like he wants t' sell."

Simon didn't say any more about it, but as soon as he could get away he cut across the tannery dam and took the path to the Grahams'. In the fenced yard behind the barn a square-built boy of nine or ten was breaking a gangling colt to lead. Simon vaulted the fence.

"Startin' in on him kind of young, ain't ye, Ezra?" he remarked.

"The sooner ye start, the easier they handle," the boy said solemnly.

"Your pa around?" Simon asked.

Ezra grinned. "Eyah. He's restin' his feet. Them new boots he wore t'day just about crippled him."

The colt tossed his head and pulled at the rope.

"I guess he wants some more lessons," Simon said, and went around the barn to the house.

Russ Graham was tilted back in a chair on the roofless side stoop, his socked feet hooked over the pump trough. He seemed both surprised and pleased to see Simon.

"Well," he said. "Come on up an' set."

Simon sat on the rail and looked at the new boots standing beside Russ. "From what Ezra says, ye didn't do such a good job of shoein' yourself—for a blacksmith," he grinned.

Russ grinned back at him. "I didn't, fer a fact, and they're a-goin' t' take some stretchin'. What's on your mind?"

Simon met the question directly. "What ye figurin' to do with your ma's place?"

"Why—sell it, I cal'late."

"Web kind of got the idea that ye was figurin' to keep it."

Russ looked at Simon sharply. Then his eyes twinkled. "Well, we was considerable apart on the price, but the's three acres of good garden land out back of the barn, and I told him all the furniture went with the place."

"What ye figure to get for it all?"

"I told Web nine hundred."

Simon's eyebrows went up and he grinned faintly. "And ye say ye'd like to sell?"

"Well, it's wuth it," Russ said defensively. "The buildings is all in good shape and them beds and tables an' chairs an' stoves—not t' mention the crock'ry and blankets an' such—they'd come to a right sizable figure fer anybuddy t' go out and buy."

"Eyah, if they was new," Simon agreed. After a moment, he asked, "How much are the taxes?"

"Twenty-six dollars an' thutty-two cents."

Simon nodded. "And the place has been empty now for goin' on four years. Time you've paid the taxes for another four years, ye figurin' to ask ten hundred for it?"

"Huh?" Russ looked startled. His hand went to his chin, and his lips moved as if he were computing something. Suddenly he exclaimed, "'Y gorry! Them taxes'll eat me up! I never thought o' that before." His eyes flicked furtively at Simon and away. Then he grinned. "What'll ye give me fer it?"

"Well, I might go as high as five hundred, if I had plenty time to pay."

"Make it six and I'll give ye all the time ye want."

Simon shook his head. "Too much. But I'll split the diff'rence with ye—you pay the taxes for the next two years and I'll give ye six hundred."

"It's a deal," Russ said, and they shook hands on it.

Well before daylight the next morning, Simon and Russ started for Fairview. Russ had a good driving horse and they arrived at the county seat shortly after eight. By noon they were at home again, Simon with a warranty deed to the old Russ place, and Russ with a five-hundred-dollar mortgage.

Aussy and Web were at the table and Ida was putting the dinner on when Simon came into the kitchen. They looked at

him and his bundles, the men with silent speculation; but Ida said:

"I don't like the look o' them things."

"What's the matter with 'em?" Simon grinned. "It's just some shirts and pants—and a pair of corked boots."

Ida shook her head and sighed. "That's about what I figured. It looks too much like ye was getting ready to leave us."

"Eyah, I thought I'd pull out in the morning."

Aussy grunted, and Web growled, "Aw, don't be in such a hurry."

"I didn't figure I was. But if I don't get to Wateegan soon, the woods crews'll be gone upriver, and I'd better be gettin' me a job before they start."

"Well, I guess that's right," Web conceded. "But I hate t' see ye go."

"Eyah," Aussy rumbled. "We'll miss ye."

Ida cleared her throat. "Well, the's one thing about it," she said. "The sooner you start, the sooner you'll be back; so I s'pose you might's well go ahead and get it over with."

It hadn't occurred to Simon that anybody, except perhaps a few of his closest friends, would be more than casually interested in his going. He had intended to see the Grants and Temp and his sisters, and anybody who happened to be at the store at mail time; but that was all, and he was surprised and a little flustered at the way people began to drop in at the Parkers' that afternoon. The news of his going spread all over town and everybody seemed to want to say good-by and wish him luck.

When Web went over to help Temp with the evening chores, Simon went with him. Web stopped at the back entry and Simon walked on to the barn. It was a mild evening and the doors were open. They let enough light on the barn floor for Simon to see Temp forking hay to the cattle. Somebody else was putting down hay from the mow and, from the driblets in which it dropped, Simon guessed it was Parker up there. Simon grunted. At least it was something, he thought, to get Parker up in the mow.

Temp held Simon's hand and looked up at him. They could barely see each other's faces. Finally Temp said:

"I'm glad you're goin', Simon. Ye never liked farmin', and

now ye'll have a good time in the woods. But don't work too hard, and don't stay away too long. And don't let me fergit that I got something to tell ye when ye turn twenty-one."

Simon swallowed and said huskily, "I'll see ye in the spring—soon as the drive comes down."

"The girls are in the kitchen," Temp said. "But don't mind Wash—go right on in. Good luck to ye, boy." He squeezed Simon's fingers, and Simon suddenly hugged him and then hurried from the barn.

Wash was standing in the door when Simon reached the back entry. Simon stopped and they looked at each other. Wash stepped back, and jeered:

"Don't mind me. Ye heard Pa tell ye to go right in, didn't ye?"

Simon went in. Margaret and Janice were getting supper and Susan was setting the table. Web rose from his chair.

"Time t' start milkin'," he said, and went out.

Simon found the next few minutes easier than it had been to say good-by to Temp. Margaret and Janice cried a little, but the five dollars he gave to each of them to buy some clothes gave them something else to think about, and he got away with promises to take care of himself and to come back in the spring.

Wash was standing in the milk-room door when Simon came from the kitchen. He was little more than a vague outline in the deepening twilight, and his voice sounded queerly muffled, when he said:

"I hope ye run onto somebody that's big enough to lick ye, when ye get to the woods."

There was no edge to his voice. It sounded almost as if he were sorry to see Simon go.

Simon laughed softly. "Like enough I will," he said. "And you better look out ye don't break that other arm."

Wash didn't answer, and Simon left him there, wondering what had cut the acid from his voice.

After supper Simon went to the Grants'. Freem grinned at him enviously.

"I'd kind of like t' be goin' with ye," he said. "But I cal'late I'm too much of a farmer t' make a go of it in the woods. I'd kind of like t' see what it's like, just the same."

"Some day, maybe," Sarah said. "I can't imagine where Debby is. She hardly ate any supper and went out somewhere." Sarah smiled wistfully. "I think she's just upset about your going—we all are. It won't be the same around here without you."

"Eyah," Marvin said, and nodded.

"Well, you tell Debby good-by for me," Simon said. He shook hands with Marvin and Freem, and Sarah kissed him. "I'll see ye in the spring," he said.

His feelings were mixed when he left the Grants'. He had dreaded saying good-by to Debby, and not finding her there should have been a relief. It was a relief, he told himself, yet it didn't seem to balance off his sense of disappointment. He came back to the house but couldn't find her anywhere about the buildings and he walked slowly back to the Parkers', down the lane and across the dam to the cemetery.

It was the third time he had come there after dark, but never before tonight had he had the feeling as he stood beside her grave that his mother was so close. It was just as if she were still alive and standing near him. The feeling was so strong that he looked about. And there, not five feet from him, stood a woman, so like his mother that he held his breath.

He took a step toward her and she ran into his arms. "Why, Debby," he said.

Presently she raised her head, and whispered, "I didn't want to see you unless you came. But you'd come before, and I—I was sure you'd come again tonight."

He looked down at her wonderingly, and found himself saying, "I—I kind of missed ye when ye wa'n't at home tonight."

"I'm glad you did," she whispered.

The feeling of her slender body became disturbing to him. He stepped back, and said, "I guess we better be gettin' along home. I'm makin' an early start in the morning and I've got some packin' to do."

She put her arm through his and let him take her home. He stopped outside the back-entry door, wondering what to say.

"Well," he said finally, "I hope ye have a good winter."

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she asked.

He hesitated and then stooped. It was no more than a peck, but even that brief touch of her lips sent fire through him. He stood there, unable to collect himself, and Debby whirled suddenly and ran into the house.

Simon couldn't have told whether it was seconds or minutes before the effects of the kiss began to wear away. It was hard to believe that a little girl like Debby could make him feel like that. A sense of shame came over him and he walked rapidly back to the Parkers'.

"You goin' with Perley, or ye want I should drive ye over?" Web asked, as he watched Simon sort out the things he was taking.

"Neither one," Simon told him. "I got some steam to work off and I'm figurin' to walk it."

20

THE stars were still bright when he set out for Brent's Falls—Brent's Falls, Wateegan, and then up the river to the big woods. He could see them as plainly as if he were already there. They pushed everything else from his mind. Temp and his sisters and Web, and even his last night's experience with Debby, all faded as the stars were fading as he walked along; and the rising sun with its flaming streamers seemed to symbolize the woods. The first book, the old familiar book of his life, was closing, and a new one was beginning. Behind him were his memories; ahead of him, his dreams.

He was glad he wasn't driving. He couldn't have sat in a wagon this morning. He was too restless. His father's carpetbag hung from the handle of the ax on his shoulder. It was heavy but he didn't feel the weight. Unconsciously, as he walked along, his fingers jingled seven silver dollars in his pocket. They were all that remained of his savings. His new shirts and boots and pants had cost him eleven dollars; he had given Russ Graham one hundred dollars as down payment on the house; he had given Margaret and Janice five dollars apiece, and had left ten dollars for Susan in the envelope with the deed, which he'd put where Web would find it after daylight.

Simon caught the morning stage from Brent's Falls to Wateegan. It was nearly thirty miles, thirty hilly miles, but the stage made it, with one change of horses, by midafternoon. Simon made his way from the stage station down to the river road. He walked along slowly, seeing everything about the river, even to its little ripples against the piers and cribbings and the little ed-

dies behind them; the calk-scarred booms, the saw mills and lumber yards. He had the strange feeling that he'd seen it all before. But there was one thing missing—the logs; and then he saw them, just a few, the last of the drives awaiting sawing, but their great brown bodies told of virgin timberlands, countless miles of huge tall trees waiting rank on rank for the lumber hog's ax and saw.

Simon's eyes turned upriver, reaching out. Soon he would be up there!

But first he had to get a job. Thirty rods down-river, log followed log up the slip on the endless bull-wheel chain and disappeared in the mill. It was, he saw, about the same kind of rig they had at home, only on a much larger scale. The mill here looked like some monster, crouched open-mouthed with its tongue in the water sucking up logs. From the deep interior came the scream of circle saws, the humming whine of planes; and clots of sawdust and shavings spewed out of chutes that overhung the water.

Simon had to go down to the river and lean out around the corner of the high board fence to see it. Down there they could tell him about logging jobs upriver, and he went back along the fence to the street and along it to the gate. It opened on acres of drying lumber rising in rectangular piles along roads. On one of the roads was a lumber wagon. A man was passing up boards from it to another on top of a pile. Simon walked toward them.

The man on the wagon was young. He nodded to Simon. "Lookin' fer lumber?"

Simon smiled and shook his head. "Lookin' for a job. Upriver. Whereabouts do they do the hirin'?"

"Why—depends on who ye want t' work fer; the comp'ny offices is in the mills, an' the jobbers' is under their hats. But it's kind of late to git a job now—most of the crews is already hired an' gone upriver."

Simon felt as if the bottom of his stomach had dropped out. "But—but the' must be somebody——"

The wizened, wiry little man on the pile cackled suddenly. "He's coddin' ye, Will. He don't need no job—no-siree! Always up t' tricks; but he can't fool me. I've worked up-

river fer him and I know him—yes-siree. Always up t' tricks."

Simon looked at him wonderingly, and the young man said, "Don't mind him—he's cracked. I——"

"Cracked, be I? I'll crack ye!" The wizened man turned to Simon and a puzzled look came over his face. "Where ye been s' long?" he asked querulously. His puzzled look grew and he put his hand to his head. "Why, the last time I see ye they was luggin' ye out o' the fire. Why—" his voice rose—"why, ye're dead! Ye been dead fer——"

"Aw-w, be still. Here"—the young man passed up a board and turned to Simon. "Ye might try Osgood an' Campbell, they ain't gone upriver yet. But they're jobbers an' they don't——"

"Brink's still here," said the little man on the pile.

"He means Brink Archer," the young man said to Simon. "I ain't seen him fer a couple days, but he cuts his own lumber and if he's still here he'd be the best one to see."

"Whereabouts can I find him?" Simon asked.

"Right on down this street, this side the bridge. Name's on a sign—ye can't miss it. I hope ye find him; he's a good boss an' his grub's fit t' eat."

"Much obliged," Simon said.

"Ye can't fool me," piped the little man. "Ye can't fool me-e! An' time Will's been round here long as I have, ye won't fool him, nuther."

Simon smiled at him and went out the gate and down the street. A black sign, lettered in gilt, "Brinkley Archer, Logs and Lumber," overhung the door to a square frame building. The door was open and Simon went in. He found himself in a large room with benches around the walls, and several tables and a dozen or more chairs scattered about the floor. Four men sat at one of the tables. At the back of the room was a counter with a gate. And behind the counter was a high-topped desk and doors leading to other rooms in the rear. An elderly man with a fringe of gray hair around his pink bald head came through one of the doors and sat at the desk. Simon took off his hat and walked to the counter.

"I'm lookin' for a job," he said. "Upriver."

The bald man shook his head without looking up.

"Is Mr. Archer here?" Simon persisted.

"We're all filled up," the bald man said, and belatedly raised his eyes. His expression changed as he looked at Simon. His eyes narrowed and then his pursed mouth slackened a little. He blinked rapidly as if to see more clearly and leaned forward, staring at Simon. Suddenly his head jerked around, and he barked over his shoulder in a cracked voice:

"Brink! Come out here!" His tone was both urgent and incredulous.

A humorous drawl came from inside, "What's the trouble?"

"Come out here!"

Simon heard a chair scrape and leisurely footfalls. One of the doors opened and a man stepped through, swinging his shoulders a trifle sideways to clear the frame. Simon had never seen such shoulders. They made the man seem as wide as he was tall, and his eyes were almost on a level with Simon's. He advanced several steps, each slower than the last, and finally halted, his gray-green eyes searching Simon with a probing keenness. Crow's-feet gathered at their corners as they narrowed and other lines appeared about his mouth, breaking the brown smoothness of his face. There was an ageless look about him, a look of physical youth and wise maturity, and Simon felt an instinctive liking for him. He came forward again, his eyes still probing Simon, till his hands rested on the counter. Then he blinked, much as the bald-headed man had done, and shook his head. Simon liked his voice, when he said:

"You ever hear of a man called Simon Hastings?"

Simon nodded. He felt a little choky. "My father," he said. "And that's my name."

"Your father, eh?" The voice was soft but it had a ringing quality. A quizzical look came into Brinkley Archer's eyes and he looked Simon up and down. "Lookin' for a job, are ye?"

"Eyah." Simon spoke more naturally. "Upriver."

"Same voice," Archer muttered. His eyes hardened. "So Simon Hastings was your father, was he? Well, ye look enough like him, and sound enough like him. And mebby you're old enough. Did ye ever see him?"

"No," Simon said. "He—he died just after he married my mother."

Bright little lights, hard and green, flecked the wide man's

eyes. His eyebrows drew down blackly to the groove above his nose.

"Son," he said softly, "Simon Hastings and me was lumber hogs together. We got out the first logs for the Wateegan Mills Company. We got our start there—buyin' our timber and workin' our own crews. Every winter we tried to beat each other gettin' out the most logs, and every spring we had it out to see which would get his drive down first. I knew him. And I never knew him to have time for women." Archer paused and leaned over the counter, closer to Simon.

His eyes grew harder and brighter, and his voice was softer and slower. "I wa'n't here that spring when he got burned to death—my drive got hung and I was late gettin' down; so I can't say that some woman didn't catch his eye. But marryin' one——" he shook his head. "That's something I can't——"

Simon's hand moved like light. It cracked against Archer's face like a board on water, staggering him. Archer clawed at the counter, recovered, and leaped over it at Simon. Simon's right fist met him, full on the chin. It sent him hurtling backward, into the counter, over it, to the floor on the other side. Simon vaulted after him and stood there, poised, waiting for Archer to get up.

"God 'lmighty!" quavered the bald-headed man at the desk. The four men at the table came to their feet, staring, like puppets on a string.

Archer blinked up dazedly at Simon. Then he felt his chin and grunted, rolled to an elbow and looked up at Simon and grinned.

"Gimme a lift," he said, and held up his hand. "That dam' counter like to broke my back."

He let out a chuckling sigh as Simon helped him up. He put his hands to the small of his back and bent forward gingerly, straightened and grinned again.

"Son," he said, "the only other feller ever did that to me was your father, and he done it the first time we laid eyes on each other." Archer felt his jaw, moving it from side to side and looking at Simon with a comical arch of his eyebrows as if being knocked over a counter were a good joke. "It takes me back to

old times," he said. "And, son, just forget what I said a while back—I just slung that at ye to see if your inwards was up to your looks."

He smiled and held out his hand. Simon took it and their fingers cracked.

"Ed," Archer said to the bald-headed man, "shake hands with Simon Hastings, Number Two. This is Ed Topham, Simon. He tends to the money and we tend to the logs."

Archer turned to the four men across the room and called them over. They seemed a little nervous but came forward grinning.

"Simon's going upriver with us," Archer said as he introduced them. "We'll see if he's as good in the woods as he is with his fists. And if any you fellers don't think he's up to his dad with his fists, you can find it out for yourself."

He gave them a dry smile and turned to Simon. "I got a job for you," he said. "The's a bunk in my office and ye can come along and rub the kink out of my back."

A delightful sense of warmth flowed through Simon as he followed Archer to his office.

21

SIMON never forgot that first trip up the river: twelve bateaux, six of them twenty feet long and nearly seven feet wide, with a pair of elephantine horses standing in each between raised gunwales, and baled hay piled just ahead of the horses; six more narrower and longer bateaux with barrels and boxes and crates of supplies amidships; five men to each bateau, four at the oars in the bow and one at the long steering sweep in the stern.

It took them six days of hard work to reach the camp; long days of rowing over still stretches, and longer and harder days of lining the bateaux through rapids, where sometimes supplies as well as horses had to be unloaded and put on drags which the horses pulled to the head of the rapids. They had hot breakfasts and suppers and two cold lunches in the middle of the day; and after dark there was little lingering around campfires. The men rolled in their blankets, too tired to sit up.

Even Simon was glad to stretch out at night. Before leaving Wateegan he had written Web, giving his address. "They will be sending out for hay and grub about once a month," he wrote, "and they will bring back any letters to camp. Brink Archer is a fine boss and I think I am going to like it pretty well."

He liked it so much better than pretty well that he simply couldn't express himself. It held him completely fascinated. The days went by so quickly that only things like the first snows and Thanksgiving, and finally a letter from Web, made him realize that winter was near. It was the first week in December that Web's letter came. It read:

Friend Simon,

Well, you and me are brother-in-laws now. Susan and me were married on November 15 and have been so busy getting fixed up that this is the first chance I've had to write to you. You old son-of-a-gun. I do not know what to say about the house, except that we like it mighty well and it is your home as much as ours. We are all well here. How do you like it up there now? I bet you are having a fine time. So am I. Write us when you get the chance.

Your brother-in-law,

Web.

Brother-in-law. Simon grinned. One of these days Web would be a father, and he'd be an uncle. But Web's letter went quickly from his mind and later on, it was the same with one from Susan and another from Debby. The woods had taken Simon over, body and mind. The first spring thaw put him in a rebellious mood; winter was nearly over and he wanted it to go on for months and months.

He found the drive exciting at times. There were gripping moments on the face of a jam when the logs got hung in a rapids. But mostly it was a case of picking up the rear—prying the big sticks off rocks and out of the brush along the shores, and he had only a mild regret when they reached the booms at Wateegan.

Two days later, after promising Brink he'd return in the fall, he took the stage for Brent's Falls and Council Rock. It was nice, in a way, to be at home again with Web and Susan, to see his family and friends. It was interesting to hear that Susan was to have a baby that fall, and they all hoped it would be a boy. It was pleasant to explore the woods again with Web and go upstream with him and Susan and Debby in the bateau. It did him good to see that Wash was actually making Parker work. But none of these things made up for the big woods, and even though he worked long hours helping Aussy and Web and Marvin and Freem with their haying it seemed as if the time would never come for him to leave for Wateegan. He arrived there ten days early, but that was better than waiting at home.

At Christmas time he had a letter from Web. It was nearly

two months in reaching him. "Susan has her baby," Web wrote. "She had quite a time but is all right now. It is a boy. Between you and me he does not look like anything at all. Freem says he never see a finer baby but he does not look like right to me. He is all wrinkles and his head bulges. We have named him Wallace."

Six weeks later, when the supply teams came in, Simon got another letter from Web. It brought bad news and made him sick at heart. It said:

"We had it mighty cold here and not much snow. The ice was a good fifteen inches thick Christmas Day. Freem and me went up and tried it. Good blue ice. I never see better. About everybody started cutting the next day. Temp and Wash marked out their piece over the deep hole. Russ and Ezra was alongside them and Freem and me was right above them.

"Temp was sawing and Wash and Parker was hauling with them young white-face steers they got last summer. They was loading up and the steers wouldn't stand and Wash went around to their heads. Temp and Parker started loading again and I heard Wash yell and there was Parker lying half across the sled and Temp sliding into the hole. He had the tongs in his hand but he never made a move to stop himself. He just kept on sliding and went out of sight in the water. He had on a pair of gum boots, them wide-topped kind, and I guess they took him right to the bottom.

"It kind of jarred us up and Freem was the first to come out of it. He run to the hole and went in after Temp. Wash was peeling off his clothes and we give him a rope to take down with him. He come right up with Freem and Freem said he had found Temp but the tongs was hooked to something on the bottom and he couldn't get Temp's hand loose. Wash went down again and tied the rope around Temp but we could not start him till we hooked Russ's horses to the rope. Temp still had hold of them tongs when he come up.

"We worked on him by the fire for quite a while but it did not do any good. He had been in the water close to ten minutes. He had a big bump on the back of his head and I guess he must of hit it on the sled or on the ice and it stunned him so he did not know anything. You would of thought that Parker and Wash would feel mighty bad about it but Parker looked more like he

was about scared to death and Wash kept looking at him like he would like to drown Parker, too. Between you and me I figure Wash is glad to have the farm for his own and Parker is scared that Wash will run him off the place.

"The girls think Wash is quite a hero for going into the ice hole twice without any clothes on, so I guess he will not have any trouble finding him a wife. The way they talk you would think the water was twice as cold going into it naked. Poor Freem, he did not stop to take off his clothes and all he got out of it is a mean cold. I guess that is about all the news. We are all mighty sorry about Temp but he has not been the same since Cora died and I guess he would not of minded much if he had knowed about it. Susan and Wallace are looking fine and so is Debby. She come home for Christmas vacation. You know she is going to school up to Fairview."

Simon read the letter again and sat with it dangling from his hand and looking absently at the pot-bellied stove. A shadow from the hanging lamp fell across him, and a voice inquired solicitously:

"Bad news?"

Simon looked up and saw Big John Hooley, the woods boss, standing beside him. He nodded.

"My stepfather," he said. "He was drowned at Christmas time—putting up ice. He was the only pa I ever knew and he was a good man."

Big John's hand dropped on Simon's shoulder. "That's too bad," he said.

"Eyah," Simon said. The bunk house seemed suddenly close and he got up and pulled on his short wool coat and went out in the night to walk the snow roads. He recalled what Temp had said about having something to tell him when he turned twenty-one. He'd be twenty-one in less than two months and now, he told himself, he'd likely never know what Temp had on his mind.

When Simon came down-river that spring he had a tiny ax-head forged at Wateegan. He whittled a hornbeam handle for it and fitted it to the head, and took the ax with him to Council Rock and presented it to his nephew.

"What in the world!" Susan exclaimed.

Simon laughed. "He ain't goin' to wait for an ax his size the way I did."

"Land of love," Susan looked at him aghast. "Here! You give that to me!"

Web's deep chuckle filled the room. "Give it to him," he urged. "He can cut his toenails with it."

"Why, Web Parker," Susan cried. Suddenly she giggled and snatched the ax and ran from the room.

Simon took his nephew from the crib and held him up, jiggling him gently. Wallace kicked and gurgled, and Simon grinned.

"You're quite a feller," he said.

Web grunted. "He ain't a marker t' what you was at his age. You was just about twice as big. But," he added complacently, "I cal'late he'll do."

"I bet!" Simon laughed. He discovered that he liked his nephew. He spent hours that summer and more hours the next, playing with Wallace. Sometimes Debby came over and played with them, and Simon liked that, too. He felt toward Debby as he did toward his sisters but there was something about her that made him uneasy when alone with her, and when he found himself quite close to her he shied away.

The fourth summer, Simon had another nephew to play with. The new baby was christened Hastings, and Simon was pleased. It tickled him to hear Wallace try to say Hastings.

"Hah-ting," was the nearest that Wallace could come to it, and that was a tongue-twisting effort.

"Throw away the Hah," Simon suggested, "and call him Ting."

"Ting!" Wallace yelped, and his chubby legs bore him around the dooryard in a delighted caper. He lost his balance and fell down. "Ting," he squealed, and looked at Simon and laughed, "Ting! Ting! Ting!"

Simon grinned and poked the new baby in the stomach. "I guess you're named for keeps, young feller," he said.

"Why don't you get some of your own?" Susan said to him one day.

He was sitting cross-legged beside Ting's blanket and keeping

an eye on the roaming Wallace. He leaned back on his hands and looked at her. It was a new idea.

Susan smiled. "Well?"

"What's the matter with these?" he countered.

"Why, nothing! But it's so much different having your own."

"Eyah?" Simon grinned. "But what would I do with 'em?"

"Enjoy them! Silly!"

"For two-three months out the year?"

"But you don't have to go upcountry. And it's time you settled down and raised a family of your own."

"And set around whittlin' ax handles?"

"Of course not! You and Web could cut your timber up the stream."

"In another five-ten years, maybe. I been up there."

"But I want to see you in a home with a family of your own."

Simon wrinkled his nose.

Susan's foot tapped the ground impatiently. Finally she demanded:

"Haven't you seen some girl you'd *like* to marry—that you *want* to marry?"

Simon shook his head. "I ain't taken much notice," he said.

"Oh," Susan stamped with exasperation and went into the house.

Simon chuckled. Married? What would he do with a wife?—even if he wanted one. From where he sat he could look across the valley at his old home. It still looked the same from the outside, and he guessed Margaret and Janice were doing a good job on the inside. Maybe that was the reason Wash hadn't got married. Wash had always said he was going to marry early and raise a big family of boys to help with the work. And the farm looked as if it could do with more help. Simon smiled faintly, thinking of the long days he'd put in over there, plowing, hoeing, cultivating, getting in the crops.

Before he returned to the woods that fall, Susan renewed her attack from a different angle.

"Looks as if Debby would be away again this winter," she remarked.

Simon was interested. "That so? Where's she headin' for this time?"

"Back to Fairview. She put in an application to teach in the grade school up there, and I guess she'll get it."

"Teachin'?" Simon exclaimed. "Debby? Why, she ain't old enough!"

Susan looked at him in astonishment. "Land of love! Doesn't time mean anything to you?" Suddenly she laughed. "You're so funny! You act like you'd forgot she'd been up there the last four winters to high school."

"Why—" A queer feeling took hold of Simon. It didn't seem possible. Four years. Why, Debby must be close to twenty. And she didn't look a day older than that afternoon when he and Web had taken her and Susan upstream and laughed at the meadow hen. Five years ago. Or was it six. They passed so quickly it was hard to count them.

"Godfrey!" He looked at Susan and grinned. "I'll be gettin' gray-headed before I know it."

"Not you," she told him with asperity. "You'll never show it. But Debby and me——" Susan dropped her shoulders and sighed. "I just don't know what I'll do with Debby away in summer as well as winter."

Simon frowned. "Ain't she goin' to be here next summer?"

"Only a week or two. They're going to have summer school for teachers, and Debby'll have to go to keep her job. For two years. But like enough she'll get married before that—she's so bright and pretty she won't last long."

Simon grunted. "She's lasted four years."

"But that was different. She was in school then, and now she'll be teaching. Somebody up to Fairview'll get her."

"She'd ought to marry somebody around here, seems as though," Simon muttered.

Susan's eyes slanted at him and away. "Well, I guess about every boy in town has tried to get her, but most of 'em gave up and married somebody else—all but George Benton and Wash."

"Wash?" Simon felt his back hair bristle.

"Yes, Wash," Susan retorted. "What's the matter with him? He's my brother, and your half brother."

"Why—he——" Simon couldn't say just what was the matter with Wash, and it made him uncomfortable. "How long's he been foolin' around her?"

"He hasn't been foolin' around her! He's been going over to see her once or twice a week when she's home. And maybe she'll take him—if somebody she likes better doesn't come along."

Simon grunted. "It don't look like that would be hard for her—I mean, to find somebody else."

But when he came right down to it, he didn't like the idea of Debby marrying anybody. It irritated him and he had to set his mind on the woods to feel like himself again. Teaming up with men, he told himself, beat teaming up with girls all to pieces. Take Brink and himself. He was next to Brink in the woods now, and they knew what to expect from each other. Simon glowed as he thought of Brink—a man worth any number of wives. Brink and he. Just as it had been Web and he. Simon frowned, puzzled. Web didn't seem to mind being married, if looks and actions meant anything, Web couldn't very well be having a better time. Simon wondered what made Web think of Susan much the same as he himself thought of the woods. How could any girl compare with the woods?"

Five more winters in the woods seemed to Simon like five more flashes of pure delight. They passed so quickly. Always he was surprised when the spring thaws came, always he was sorry, even though the thrills of the drive were still ahead, even though he would spend two months, perhaps three, with Web and Susan and his nephews and see his other sisters and his friends again. The woods still claimed him. Summer was simply an intermission until he could get back to them.

At odd times during those five winters, Debby would pop into his head and start a train of thought that always brought him to Web and Susan. But the key to their enjoyment of life continued to elude him. There wasn't a thing he could put his finger on. Whereas the woods—why, they were the woods; towering spruce and fir, shaggy pine and hemlock; masses of needles, long and feathery, flat and lacy, round and bristly, rising, dark green, light green, blue green, high above the shadowy snow in massive arches supported on endless brown-barked columns; the ring of axes, the swish of crosscut saws, the rolling yell of *"Tim-m-ber,"* the thunder of falling trees, and in the distance the tinkle of bells that marked the passage of the huge log sleds from the brows to the skidways on the river.

Where was there a woman to compare with that? To Simon the answer was very simple: there was no woman to compare with that. At least, not since his mother had gone. Not Susan, not Debby. Although Debby, these past two summers, had made him feel sometimes a little as he had toward his mother. She had a sort of poise like his mother's which might be due to her schoolteaching. And like his mother, she sometimes turned red or white for no apparent reason. It made him wonder if she had a weak heart like his mother's; but he didn't see how that could be, because Debby could run like a deer without any distress, something his mother could never do.

After Debby's two summers at the teachers' school, Simon left Council Rock for the woods with feelings different from the eagerness that he usually experienced. It was more as if he were escaping from an ever growing danger. Why, he wondered, didn't Debby get married and live in Fairview, as Janice had done? Janice could hardly wait to finish high school, but Debby seemed to think more of teaching than getting married.

The second summer that Debby had been at home, just before he started back to the woods, Simon blurted to her in a sort of desperation:

"You figurin' to be an old maid?"

The honey-colored tan of her clear skin seemed instantly painted red, a soft warm red that touched the roots of her hair before it receded and left her pale. Her gray eyes wavered under dark lashes and then held steady.

"No more than Margaret is," she smiled.

"But that's diff'rent," he told her. "Freem's been goin' with her for the last four years."

Debby moved her head and slanted her eyes. "But he hasn't asked her yet."

"Mebby not, but he'll get round to it; give him time."

"I hope so," she said, and added a little faintly, "and maybe somebody'll get around to asking me sometime, too."

Simon gave her an incredulous look. "You mean to tell me that nobody's asked ye?"

Debby didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, more faintly, "Nobody—that I wanted, anyhow."

"Well," Simon said urgently, almost roughly, "it's about

time somebody came along that ye did want. It's time ye got married and settled down."

Her startled expression and the deathly pallor that slowly turned her face to ivory haunted him for days. He argued with himself about going to see her and telling her that he hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. But he couldn't very well tell her that he simply wanted peace for himself, that he couldn't have any peace while she was around. So he left Council Rock without seeing her again and he swung down from the stage at Wateegan with more of an urge to get away upriver than he had ever before experienced.

He walked briskly to the office and took in one stride the steps under the familiar gilt-lettered sign. A dozen men lounged about the waiting room, foremen, boss teamsters, cooks, and all had a subdued look—even Big John Hooley and little Neddeau, the fire-eating master of Camp One's horses. Simon grinned at them and shook hands. They looked, he thought, as if somebody had chipped a blaze on them. But he didn't let them see that he noticed anything.

"Brink here?" he asked.

Every breath in the room but Simon's seemed suspended. Big John struggled with embarrassment. He coughed. Then his head bobbed toward the offices in the rear. A touch of concern attached itself to Simon's curiosity. He flipped his turkey across his shoulder and headed for the counter gate. He stopped there a moment to shake hands with Frank Moran, who had taken Ed Topham's place in the outer office.

"Looks like ye had a good summer," Frank remarked. "So did Brink," he added, and snickered.

Simon's concern abated but his curiosity increased. He went on back to the large room that he had shared with Brink as Wateegan headquarters for the past two years. Brink's broad shoulders were humped over a supply list on the desk. He appeared to be deeply absorbed in it. Simon closed the door and waited. Brink didn't look up. Simon's turkey sailed across the room. It landed, heavy with winter clothes and boots, squarely across Brink's head and neck—and bounced, as Brink, on the impact, rose and turned and dived at Simon.

Their hard palms smacked on each other's backs and buttocks,

and the floor shook with their weight as they wrestled, laughing. The racket died as suddenly as it had begun and they stood in the middle of the floor, a little out of breath, their hands on each other's shoulders, grinning at each other.

"Well," Simon demanded, "what all you been doin'?"

Brink dropped his eyes, actually dropped his eyes, and chuckled diffidently. Then his eyes came up and Simon saw something in them he'd never seen before.

"I been gettin' married, son," Brink told him softly.

Simon stared at him dumfounded. Married! Brink? Here it was again. Web, and now Brink! He had a sort of shriveled feeling in his throat and chest.

The crow's-feet deepened at the corners of Brink's eyes. Then he smiled and shook Simon's shoulders gently. "Don't take it that way, son," he said. "Gettin' married's the high ding-dong. You'll be doin' it yourself some day."

Simon shook his head. "It ties a man down," he muttered.

"Ties him down?" Brink laughed. "Eyah, like Jasper tied the bull! I'm only kickin' myself I didn't do it thutty years ago. It gives a feller something to work for besides just the fun of doin' it. And I might of had a son to go on with ye when I get through."

Simon's fingers bit into Brink's shoulders. "You—you ain't through?"

Brink's jaw sagged. He looked as if he thought Simon had lost his mind. Then a gleam of understanding quickened his eyes. "Ye thought I wa'n't goin' back to the woods?"

Simon nodded. Brink guffawed. He caught Simon in a bear hug and rocked him from side to side. Still chuckling, he drew back at arm's length.

"So ye thought I'd be tied down to home, did ye? I'll show ye how I'm tied down. Son, I got contracts for twenty million and it's going to keep us humping—the both of us!—you understand?"

Simon grinned slowly. "You're goin' in? Just the same?"

"Just the same," Brink chuckled. "Oh, I'll mebby come out a couple times—but not for long."

22

BRINK went out for Thanksgiving and for ten days over the Christmas holidays. He went out again for a week in March and, on his return, said, "It looks like I was gettin' to be the mail man."

He handed Simon a letter, a long breezy letter from Susan telling of all the comings and goings, the village gossip, the latest antics of the children. One paragraph disturbed him. It had to do with Debby and Wash.

"It looks like Debby is thinking more than commonly about Wash. When she was home for Christmas vacation Wash spent most of his time over there. He has done that before and we didn't think much about it, but when he drove in for her and brought her home for Washington's Birthday folks began to take notice. It was the first time Debby ever let anybody but Freem or Marvin go to Fairview for her, so I guess she's about made up her mind to get married."

Simon read the paragraph several times and sat staring at nothing for minutes before going on with the letter. When he came to the last page he was pleasantly surprised to see Web's angular writing.

"Here is something for you to think about. We have been electing Cyrus Whitly to the legislature regular because he always makes a lot of promises about what he is going to do and then he does not do anything but draw his pay. Pa and Otis Wick and Ormond Story say it is about time we got some new blood in politics around here."

For a moment, Simon couldn't place Ormond Story, and then he recalled he was the man who had come up from Brunswick a few years ago to take over the tannery, a busy man, who still ran a business in Brunswick.

"There does not seem to be anybody around here who comes up to what they want and who could beat out Cyrus but you. So they figure you are the man to take his place and get some things done. You will not have any trouble getting elected as folks are mighty tired of Cyrus and they all like you. Pa asked me to tell you this so you could be thinking about it."

Think about it! It struck Simon as being the best joke he'd heard in years. He read it to Brink and laughed again. "Me," he laughed. "Me in the legislature! Why, the only time I've even voted there was one September—only time I've ever voted in my life! And even if I could get elected, what would I be doin' down to Augusta in the winter? Why——" the idea of spending even a part of the winter away from the woods was monstrous.

He suddenly noticed that Brink didn't seem to think it was very funny. Brink's expression was quizzical and his big square fingers were thumping his knees.

"I ain't said anything about it, Simon," he said, "but Jed Sawyer has kind of got the idea that he wants to cut all the timber on this river himself. He's tried some tricks already to put me out of it, and now he's figurin' on buyin' into the railroad. If he works it, he could get the lumber rates raised enough to put us out of business, and get rebates on his own stuff. We got right around sixty million feet left in our lay, and I hope we can clean it up before anything happens—but that'll mean twenty million a year for the next three years and it'll keep us mighty busy."

Simon regarded him with dread suspense. "You—you mean we—we only got three more years—and mebby not that?"

"I dunno," Brink said. "I think he's kind of scairt of this Interstate Commerce Commission that Congress put through a couple of years ago. He ain't goin' to sink his money in any

railroad till he's sure he can do what he wants, and if he's got to go to the Commission before he can change the rates, he'll stay out of it. The Commission ain't any real authority now, and I figure he'll wait till he sees whether Congress is goin' to give it any. I been talkin' to our Congressman and both our Senators this summer and I'm hoping we can stall Jed off. But mebby," Brink smiled, "the both of us'll have to get into politics."

"I guess I'd do about anything," Simon said, "to keep us in the loggin' business. But what—" he swallowed—"what ye figurin' on when we finish up this lay?"

Brink smiled. "I got a little surprise for ye. When I was out I got the Henderson heirs to give me a three-year option on their——"

"Them!" Simon's eyes lighted up with excited eagerness. "Why, they got enough timber to last us all our lives! And ye got a three-year option?"

"Eyah," Brink chuckled. "I beat Jed out, there, and it didn't cost me much—just because Joe Henderson don't like Jed. And if we can tie a knot in Jed's tail, we'll be all ready to start in on the Henderson lay when we finish up around here."

"Well, I hope we don't have to go into the legislature to do it."

Brink shook his head and grinned wryly. "I don't figure that would help us much. Them fellers are thinkin' too much about keepin' their jobs to vote against big money."

There was still much work to do to land the last of their twenty million feet of logs on the brows before the ice went out. Simon was too busy to give much thought to what Jed Sawyer might do; he was too busy to think of anything but his work, but he couldn't help thinking about Wash and Debby. What Susan had written about them kept popping into his mind, and when he came down-river that spring he had reached the point where he was arguing with himself that Debby was no concern of his. But Debby—little Debby, and Wash——!

Simon caught the stage from Wateegan as soon as he could get away. He didn't wait for the mail stage home from Brent's Falls. Perley Dixon was getting old and drove so slow that Simon knew he could beat the stage by a couple of hours on foot. He slung his turkey over his shoulder and struck out. It was

midafternoon when he came in sight of the village. Everything seemed just the same. Cattle grazed in the pastures; the brown earth of the fields was shot with green; corn, potatoes, peas, beans and the oats and rye and wheat looked like green plush carpets, inches thick.

Wash, he saw as he came alongside the Thurston fields, had a good catch of corn and millet. Wash was a good farmer when he put his mind to it, and he seemed to be putting his mind to it more than ever this spring. Simon wondered how Parker liked to put in a real day's work in the fields. The idea gave him a sort of grim satisfaction. At the same time he felt a grudging respect for Wash in getting that much out of Parker. The house and dooryard looked just the same and he was tempted to stop and say hello to Margaret and ask her how she was coming with Freem. But he might run into Wash and in his present frame of mind it would be too hard to keep his hands off him.

He walked on to the Parkers' but Ida was not at home. Aussy, he knew, would be down at the factory, and Ida, likely, was at the Grants'. He wasn't so sure he wanted to stop at the Grants'. Debby might be there and he had an unaccountable reluctance to face her now. But even if her school were out she'd likely hang around Fairview a while with the other teachers as she had done the last couple of years; and anyhow he wanted to see Sarah and Freem and Marvin.

He dropped his turkey at the Grants' kitchen door and started to go in. But the door was locked and he frowned in surprise and knocked. Nobody home here either, he thought. He stooped for his turkey and straightened, listening. Somebody was coming; light steps like Sarah's. The door opened and instead of Sarah, it was Debby. She wore a little flat hat and a white shirtwaist and a short walking skirt that came just below the tops of her shoes. For the briefest split second she looked at him blankly. Then a hand went to her breast—a gesture that reminded him of his mother. Bright spots flamed in her cheeks and a disquieting look came into her eyes.

Simon had an impulse to run—an incomprehensible feeling. But it left him the instant she spoke, and a different uneasiness took hold of him.

"Simon!" she whispered. Then she laughed, and her voice was casual, almost cool, when she said, "You surprised me—I was looking for somebody else."

Simon forced a grin. "You surprised me, too. I wa'n't lookin' for ye home this early. I just got in—walked over from the Falls and I thought I'd stop and see your ma and pa and Freem."

Debby took a quick deep breath and smiled brightly. Simon had seen her do that before when she was hurt or disappointed, and he wondered what the trouble was now. Then she said:

"Oh, I'm sorry. Ma's up to the Bentons' at the sewing circle and Pa's over on the hill with Freem." She stepped outside. "It's nice to be home again, isn't it?" she said, and her look made him think again of his mother.

"Kind of," he said uncertainly. "How long ye been home?"

"Three days. I scampered home the minute I could get away."

"Sounds like ye was in kind of a hurry to get here."

Debby gave him a quick look. Then she laughed a little shortly, as if she were rebuking herself. "I was," she said.

"But I thought ye liked it up there," Simon persisted. "So much goin' on and all."

She shook her head, and her eyes were cool when she slanted them up at him. "Too much of it," she told him. "It was fun for a while but this spring it got—stuffy; like a room with all the windows and doors closed, and lots of people in it."

"Eyah," Simon said understandingly. "That's the way I get to feelin'. Come fall, if I couldn't get off to the woods I reckon I'd blow up and bust."

Debby nodded and looked off toward Saddleback's green contours. A half-smile gave a wistful touch to her face. Simon caught the sound of boots striding at a familiar pace. For a moment he had the feeling that Temp was about to come around the corner. It didn't improve his mood to know that it must be Wash. He faced the corner, waiting, and felt Debby's hand come to rest on his arm.

Wash appeared around the corner. He seemed a little bolder, a little more self-assured, reminding Simon of a prowling hawk. A smoky look came into Wash's eyes. It was the only sign he gave of having noticed Simon, and he came up to Debby, step-

ping close and taking her arm. He did it so possessively that Simon's hand lifted.

Debby stepped quickly between them. "We were going for a walk," she said.

Simon's hand hovered a moment, and dropped. "Oh," he muttered, "it was him ye was expectin'?"

"Yes." She nodded and took another deep quick breath and smiled. "He's going to show me a nest of partridge eggs."

"Pa'tridge eggs—this late in June?"

Wash looked up at Simon with drooping lids, and the point of his long nose seemed to quiver. His tone was as insolent as his expression.

"Eyah," he drawled. "Pa'tridge eggs. This late in June."

Simon snorted. Then he laughed and his hands opened and closed. "I'll never get over wishin' ye was twice as big," he said. He snorted again. "Pa'tridge eggs! Well, it might be—if something happened to the hen. Mebby a hawk got her." He looked down at Debby, knowing that she knew it was closed season on partridges. "If you'd been round here two-three weeks ago, like enough you'd smelled some feathers burnin'."

"Meanin' what?" Wash demanded.

Simon looked at him a long moment. "Hawks," he said. He picked up his turkey, and said to Debby, "And they're bad medicine for hens—any kind of hens."

Debby bit her lips and her eyes wavered. Simon wondered what she was thinking. Running round with Wash like this, she must like him pretty well. A queer sort of rage shook him; nothing was right anymore!

"I'll be goin'," he said to Debby. "Tell your folks I'll mebby be over tonight." He jerked his head at her and headed for the road.

At the foot of the dooryard he stopped, half turning to go back. Then he went on. He passed the Gregg and Davenport places without being more than hazily aware of them; but at the turn something struck him as being out of place and he realized then that the old tavern was gone. Since he could remember, it had been used for nothing but a storage place for hides, but it had been a sturdy old building, a landmark, and he wondered what

had happened to it. He went in and looked down at the cellar hole. No signs of fire, no cultch, and the granite foundations looked as good as new. It must, he knew, have been torn down; but who would want it?

He crossed the lot to the Crockett hill road and forgot about the tavern. A saw whined thinly in the box shop; that would be Otis Wick whittling away, and hardly enough water to turn his water wheel. Simon grunted. He came to the bridge and glanced at the dam. As usual, by this time in June, the planks were off the dam and barely a trickle, thinly spotted with sawdust, came from the box-shop wheelrace. Under the sawmill the water was quiet. Simon grunted again. Throwing away water power all summer just to get in a few tons of meadow hay! Wash and Parker would have to buy up those meadows before they started cutting their timber, or they wouldn't be able to saw out enough to pay for getting in the logs. Wash and Parker—a hawk and a greasy toad! Why, Simon asked himself, couldn't some lumberman have owned all that timber upstream?

Nobody was loafing on the store steps and no voices inside. Old Lish was likely taking a nap. Across the road in the blacksmith and wagon shops there were more signs of life. Russ Graham was heating a turnbuckle for a tannery vat hoop, his hand moving slowly up and down with the bellows arm, his eyes intent on the forge; and next door young Ezra Graham and two of the Benton boys were busy setting up a wagon under Emory Davenport's direction. The fringe around Emory's bald head was snow-white now and his shoulders were getting stooped. Time he was breaking in some boys to help him out, Simon thought, and hurried by before they saw him. He didn't feel like talking. He felt more like jerking something wrong side out.

He went on up the road to the old Russ place. Web had insisted on taking over the mortgage and now it was his, free and clear. The roof was a yellowish brown with new cedar shingles and the clapboards were white with fresh paint. Web was keeping the place up fine, Simon thought, with a flicker of interest. But before he had climbed the rise to the dooryard he was glum again. He tried the side door, wondering if it was locked. It wasn't and he went in. He listened a moment but there wasn't a

sound. He dropped his turkey in the corner by the bookcase and walked back to the kitchen. It was empty. Then he remembered the sewing circle. Susan would be there, and Web would be helping Aussy at the factory. Simon was sorry he hadn't gone down there instead of to the Grants'. He wondered where the boys were and went out through the woodshed, the wagon house, the barn; back to the wagon house and there his two small nephews swooped upon him, yelling.

Web appeared in the door, and chuckled, "We was out in the garden and saw ye come."

Simon sat Wallace on one shoulder and Ting on the other and managed to shake hands with Web. He ducked his head between the two squirming bodies. His hat went flying and Ting caught his hair to save himself from falling.

"That'll do," Web said. "You boys run along and finish your hoeing."

"Aw, leave 'em be," Simon laughed. The uproar about his head was shaking him loose from his grumpiness.

"They can have it out later," Web said, and reached for Ting.

Wallace slid to the floor. "Beat ye out there," he cried to Ting, and they went off, racing.

"What's the trouble?" Web inquired.

Simon frowned. "Trouble?"

"Eyah. Ye look like ye was ready t' bust somebody."

"Do I?" Simon grinned thinly. It was bad enough to feel this way, let alone show it. He got hold of himself and his grin became more natural. "Oh, I'd just like to see how many knots I could tie Wash into."

A half-humorous, half-serious expression came over Web's face. "You run into him already?"

"Over to the Grants'—he was takin' Debby for a walk."

Web looked surprised. "Well, I be dogged," he muttered. "Stayin' home from sewin' circle t' go walkin' with Wash." He shook his head. "That looks like Debby had made up her mind —and I was hopin' you'd be the one t' get her."

"But she—she'd never marry Wash!" Simon said.

"I dunno about that," Web said slowly. "Wash's shapin' up mighty like Temp. He's a good farmer and doin' well and he gets along fine with about everybody but you and me."

A queer tight feeling had been creeping into Simon's throat and now he felt half stifled. He looked across the valley at the Grant place, and swallowed.

A shrewd look came into Web's eyes. "Mebby—" he hesitated—"mebby if you was t' take a hand you could get her mind off Wash."

"Me?" Simon gave him a startled look.

"Eyah. You're figurin' to get married sometime, ain't ye?"

"Why—sometime. But I—I got no time for it now."

"No-o," Web said deeply. "No, I reckon not. A feller that's away in the woods nine months of every year ain't any business gettin' married."

Simon found this unaccountably irritating. "Brink got married," he retorted.

"Eyah. But Brink's gettin' old. He ain't——"

Simon snorted. "He's just as good in the woods as ever. He's just the right age to get married!"

Web smiled owlishly and sarcasm edged his voice. "Eyah, when a feller gets up around sixty he can go around most anywhere and find him a wife that's young enough t' have kids—or maybe ye've give up the idea of havin' any kids?"

Simon hadn't given up the idea and it set him thinking. Next to going back to the woods every fall, the one thing that he looked forward to most was coming home to his two young nephews in the spring. And for years he'd had a picture back in his mind of boys, and maybe some girls, of his own. He frowned at Web, and the picture changed to Debby.

"Well," he said, "Wash won't get her—not if I can help it."

He blinked suddenly, a little dazed by what he'd said and the conviction that he'd meant it. Web's slow smile and the gleam in his eyes made Simon acutely conscious of himself. He wet his lips and groped for a way to qualify his statement. Then Web said, as if he read Simon's thoughts:

"It looks like ye've hit it. Eyah," he chuckled, "that's it, and it'll sure be some fun t' watch ye run a blaze on Wash."

Simon stared at Web and began to grin. That was it! Wash wasn't big enough to hit but he was plenty big enough to run a blaze on. Take Debby away from him and make him shine like a new-spotted tree; peel the bark clean off him!

All at once Simon laughed. His hands cracked against his thighs, and he said, "Remember that bobcat we caught with the lamb?" He laughed again. "Well, the's somebody going to start snarlin' an' spittin' worse than that—and he's goin' to start it right soon!"

Web's eyes snapped. "Eyah?"

"Eyah," Simon answered. "Mebby some folks'll think I'm figurin' to get married, but you and me'll know diff'rent. Come on to the woodshed, I got some steam to work off."

He threw an arm about Web and half carried him to the woodshed, searched for some knotty chunks, spit on his hands, picked up the ax, winked at Web and set to work. Web sat in the woodshed door looking out toward the road. From time to time he glanced uncertainly at Simon. He leaned back against the frame and swung his foot. Simon's arms rose and fell. The ax chucked into one knotty chunk and then another. Web watched the effortless swing, the sure strokes that placed the blade to a hair line, deep, but not too deep. He shook his head and his foot moved slower and slower. His mouth opened, closed, opened again.

"Ye figured how this business'll likely wind up?"

Simon grinned. "Kind of."

"All the way?"

"Why—sure."

" But what'll ye do if ye take Debby away from Wash? Ye can't just stop and—and call it off."

"I don't need to," Simon grinned. "If Freem can keep Marg-'ret on the string for four-five years, and him livin' here right along, I cal'late I won't have much trouble with Debby."

Web's jaw fell. "Well, I be go t' hell," he ejaculated. "But look here—that ain't the same! Everybody knows that Freem an' Marg'ret's going t' get married. It's just——"

"You don't mean that he's finally asked her?" Simon broke in.

"No, he ain't. But he's gettin' mighty close to it. What ye reckon happened to the tavern?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

Web chuckled. "Why, last fall I told Freem a good way to get a girl was t' build him a house and let her do the plannin'.

He thought it was a right good idee and he bought the tavern and tore it down and now he's got him a nice set of buildings—all laid out the way Marg'ret wanted it—all but the barn. The' ain't hardly a day he don't take her up there and see if he's doin' it right."

"So that's where he was," Simon exclaimed. "Debby said he was over on the hill. Whereabouts is it?"

"He bought the piece that Perley used for his pasture and he's building right across the road from Henry Locke's. Did I tell you that Perley was pullin' out? His mail contract is up the first of July and he's going in t' Fairview t' live; says him and Judith is old enough to take it easy now, and Henry's got the contract."

"Well," Simon said. "We'll kind of miss Perley, but Henry'll be a better man for the stage."

"None better. And him and Bertis are both workin' on Freem—and Marg'ret, too. They don't figure to have an empty set of buildings across from 'em any longer'n they have to." Web chuckled. "Marg'ret's near as funny about it as Freem—says he's got t' do the askin' all by himself, even if she has to wait till she's gray-headed. But time the house is finished, I cal'late we'll find a way to get Freem's tongue unraveled."

Simon grinned. "If ye think Freem's bashful, you just keep an eye on me—I mean, after we get Wash chased off."

Web had to laugh. Then he asked, "Ye think that's fair t' Debby?"

"Well—I know I'd rather she died an old maid than see her hooked up to Wash. And anyhow," Simon's eyes twinkled, "in ten or a dozen years I'll likely feel like gettin' married, myself."

Web shook his head slowly and glanced at the road. "Here comes the women folks, and I told Susan——" he got up and hurried into the kitchen.

Simon went to the door and ducked back out of sight. Susan was standing at the foot of the driveway talking with Vera Perkins and Effie Norton, and he had no desire to have Vera see him and talk him half to death.

He heard the rattle of a stove lid inside and concluded that Web had let the fire go out. It would, Simon told himself, be a long day before he'd be doing such things for his wife! He

sat down on a chunk and waited. The rattling in the kitchen stopped. Presently he peered from the door again. Nobody was in sight and he waited, listening. Footsteps were coming back through the kitchen, and he moved behind the back-entry door. Susan came out and he slipped behind her.

"Where ye goin'?" he laughed.

Susan spun around and he picked her up and held her high.

"Oh," she gasped, "you're breaking my ribs!"

"Eyah, save your bear hug for Debby," Web chuckled.

Simon put Susan down. "You got it wrong," he said to Web. "I ain't aimin' to bother Debby; I'm aimin' to work on Wash."

"You better leave them both alone," Susan said.

Simon smiled down at her as if she were a child. "I'm just figurin' to——"

"No," Susan broke in, "you leave them alone." Her fingers fastened on his shirt front. "You had your chance—years of it, but you didn't do a thing; and now you've lost it—it isn't any business of yours what they do!"

Simon's smile tightened. "Well, I'm makin' it my business."

"But you can't," Susan cried. "Don't you see? You've hurt Debby enough already!"

Simon stared at her. "Hurt Debby? I never hurt her—I wouldn't hurt her for anything!"

An incredulous look came over Susan's face. "I don't believe you know," she said slowly.

"Know what?"

Susan shook her head. "It wouldn't do any good to tell you now. But—" she hesitated—"maybe if you did know, you'd see why you must leave them alone." She looked up at him gravely, pleadingly. "If you ever let Debby know I've told you this, I don't believe she'd ever speak to me again. But, Simon, I know that she's been waiting for you, waiting for years for you to ask her to marry you, and she'd have gone on waiting forever, I think, if it hadn't been for what you said to her last fall. Do you remember what you said?"

Simon wet his lips. "You—you mean about her gettin' married?"

Susan nodded. "But it wasn't just what you said; it was the

way you said it—as if you didn't want her—that it wouldn't do her any good to wait for you any longer and she might as well go ahead and marry somebody else."

"My—Godfrey," Simon muttered, and swallowed.

Susan said gently, "And that's the reason you mustn't bother them. I don't believe she'd marry you, now, if you asked her—and as you don't intend to get married for years, if you ever do, the best thing is just to leave them alone—both of them."

Simon looked at Susan without seeing her. He saw only Debby and Wash, and the sight of Wash taking possessive hold of her arm seemed to tear things loose inside him. He knew now that it wasn't just Wash; the feeling went for anybody—anybody but himself. He shook his head and drew in a jerky breath.

"I guess I'll be marryin' her myself," he said. "If she'll have me."

Susan's eyes filled with tears and she turned suddenly and went in the house. Simon glanced at Web. Web was regarding him with both sympathy and speculation.

"You mean what ye said about gettin' married?" Web asked.

Simon nodded.

"I mean marry her right away?" Web persisted.

Simon nodded again.

23

Now that Simon knew what Debby meant to him, it wasn't so bad to give in to the idea of getting married. It wouldn't keep him from the woods any more than it had Brink. He grinned a little and felt better than he had for months. There was only the question now of what Debby would say, and he wasn't so much worried about that as he was over how to go about it.

He couldn't just go up to Debby and say, "Come on, we're going to get married." Something told him it wouldn't be anywhere near as simple as that. He'd have to work it so she'd forget what he told her last fall, and he'd have to show her how he felt before he said anything.

"How's the old bateau?" he asked.

"We'll never shove her upstream again," Web said. "Bottom's gone; rotted out. But I got Otis t' make me a new one this spring. I been too busy t' try her out yet but I cal'late she'll go all right."

"I guess I'll take a look at it. Whereabouts is it?"

"Down to the mill," Web told him and looked at his watch. "Gettin' on towards mail time and I'll go with ye an' take the boys. They been after me for a boat ride ever since Otis finished sawin'."

They walked back to the garden, quartering through sunlight that slanted warmly down through feathery white clouds. The boys were stretched out in the grass at the end of the patch of sweet corn. The earth was damp and loose from their hoeing. They lay on their backs, their feet in the cool dirt.

"That's something we never did," Web said.

Simon's mind was on Debby and the boat and he was

wondering if he could get her to go upstream with him. He glanced at the boys and smiled. "Never had time to," he answered Web. "And didn't want to, anyhow. Godfrey, how I used to swing a hoe so's I could get done and off in the woods." He lifted his eyes over garden and hayfield and pasture to the fringe of gray birch and alder, and beyond them to the woods, unbroken for miles and miles except for the curving stream. "That's where we'd of been if we'd got through the work for the day."

"And that's likely where they'll be," Web chuckled, "in a couple more years or so." He raised his voice. "Hey there! You boys too wore out t' go with us for the mail?"

The boys rolled to their feet, grinning sheepishly. "We didn't see you," Wallace said. "Get your hoe, Ting, and hurry up."

They galloped ahead and had their hoes cleaned and hung up by the time Web and Simon reached the wagon house. Together they went down the driveway. A middle-aged woman was going into the old Dow place, just above them, and Simon asked: "Who's that?"

"Ormond Story's wife," Web told him. "He took over the house with the rest of the tann'ry prope'ty, but this spring's the first time they've used it."

Ormond Story's name brought back to Simon what Web had written about politics last winter. Politics was the last thing he wanted to think about and he looked down the street at Doctor Luce's house.

"How's Emma and Freem makin' out?" he inquired. "They must be gettin' right snug to eighty."

"Eyah," Web said. "And it beats all how they keep up. Emma's just as smart as ever, but Freem gets a little shaky sometimes and Emma and Sarah have been at him t' take somebody in with him, or quit. But he just laughs and says he's waitin' for Freem or Debby t' get married so he can deliver his own first great grand-baby."

Simon went queerly hot and cold. That great grand-baby might be Debby's! And its father——Simon's eyes narrowed.

"Well, Simon!" a familiar voice hailed. "When did you git back?"

Simon turned his head and saw Emory Davenport coming

toward him, grinning. Ezra Graham and the Benton boys came out, and Simon and Web stopped and talked with them a few minutes. Then they went on. The blacksmith shop smelled strongly of scorched hoofs and forge smoke, but Russ Graham wasn't there.

"Likely gone home for a doughnut or a piece of pie," Web remarked. "He's still the eatin'est cuss—and it ain't any wonder his feet gets t' hurtin', with all he has to lug around."

"Where'd the boys get to?" Simon asked. He glanced across at the store but it seemed as empty as the blacksmith shop.

"I got an idee," Web said, and his tone made Simon look at him. "Come on and we'll find out."

They went around the shop and through the lumberyard. The boys appeared suddenly, running toward them around a pile of boards.

"Oh," Wallace said, and looked at his father furtively. Then his eyes brightened, and he begged, "Take us out in the boat, won't ye? Take us ridin'!"

"I cal'late that'll depend," Web said, "on where ye been."

"Why—uh—" Wallace rolled his eyes—"we just been around here."

"Ye' ain't been up in the mill?"

Wallace gulped and glanced at Ting. Then he put his hands behind him and looked his father in the eye. "Eyah," he said, and gulped again.

Web made a deep sound in his throat and frowned. "Ye heard me tell ye t' stay away from the mill, didn't ye?"

"Eyah."

"Hm-m-m," Web rumbled again. "Well, what ye cal'late we better do about it?"

Wallace's eyes flickered with a measure of hope. "Give us a boat ride and then put the birch to us."

Web's mouth twitched but he shook his head. "No, I reckon ye better line it back home. The's time for fun and time for other things. And this is the time t' do some rememberin'. Now you boys run on home an' think it over."

Slowly and with averted eyes the boys trudged past their father and Simon and left the yard without appeal, without even looking back.

"Dang 'em!" Web muttered, but his voice was full of pride.

Simon chuckled, and there was pride in his own voice, when he said, "Seems as though ye could stand a few more like 'em."

"Eyah," Web said. "We'd like it—the both of us. But it looks like two was all we'd get."

Simon looked at him in surprise. "I thought ye could always get 'em when ye wanted 'em—and sometimes when ye didn't want 'em," he added with a grin.

Web regarded him with his half-humorous, half-serious smile. "Looks like ye had some things t' learn about women. They got their limits—like I was tryin' t' tell ye a while back—and they can stop havin' babies even before they get too old."

Simon went hot and cold again. "I guess that's right," he muttered, and looked about for a less personal subject. He nodded toward some piles of round-edge boards, and remarked, "Nothin' but knots an' bark. What's Otis do with stuff like that?"

Web grinned. "You and your lumber. Come on if ye want t' look at that boat."

They went on across the lumberyard. The lower floor of the mill was open. It was on a level with the ground and ran out over the wheelrace. Simon looked at the old wheelhouse and shook his head.

"Why don't Otis get him a wheel that'll turn up some power?" he said. "And another thing: he'd ought to buy up the meadows. The's no sense in lettin' water run off like this just to save a few tons of mean meadow hay."

Web chuckled. "If anybuddy can pry them meadows off Charles and Levi, he'll be doin' something that nobuddy else could. 'Wh—huh—why,' " he gobbled, imitating Levi Scott, " 'm-m-my g-gran'daddy m-mowed them m-meadows afore the s-saw mill ever was th-thought of.' Eyah, by Godfrey, they'd sooner cut off a foot than sell them meadows—Levi an' Charles, both! And I cal'late Otis ain't got the money t' put in a new water wheel."

They went up to the main floor. The log carriage and its wooden tracks, the bull wheel that pulled the logs up the slip with its chain, the cut-off saw and the slab saw, all looked the same. There hadn't been a change in years and years, and Simon

was struck afresh with wonder that such aged equipment could turn out such a yardful of lumber. Odds and ends lay about the floor, from a worn glove to the roller's short-handled spikeless cant dog. Simon picked up the board rule, half buried in sawdust.

"Otis could stand some house cleanin'," he remarked.

"Eyah," Web grinned. "It's a wonder he can find anything. But he gets things done—give him time. Yonder's the boat."

Simon followed him across the mill to where the boat lay on planks by the shingle machine. Its sides were high and the ends were drawn in to half its width amidships.

"Four seats and a fish box," Simon said. "Looks right handy, and tight. How long's the water been in it?"

"Ever since the paint dried—around three weeks."

"Looks like Otis had done a good job." Simon slipped his fingers under one end and lifted. Some twelve feet of the boat came up from the planks, and water splashed out at the far end. "Light, too," he remarked.

"Eyah," Web said dryly. "With the water in it, it don't weigh an ounce over five hundred pounds. Want to try her out?"

"Ain't hardly time enough to make it worth while, and no fit place to tie up to. I'll come down in the morning and fix up the boom walk like we used to have it."

They left the mill by way of the lumber chute. It faced the road, and Simon saw the stage coming around the turn. Henry Locke was riding beside Perley, and Simon said, " 'Y Godfrey, don't that take ye back?"

Web looked puzzled, and Simon reminded him. "Back to wartime, when Henry come home."

"Oh," Web said. "I'd clean forgot it."

Simon shook his head. "I'll never forget it. I couldn't figure what he'd do without his arm. Just think of it, Web—he must of been quite a man in the woods, strong as a bull and all these years with only one arm. I'd rather that minnie ball had got me between the eyes."

"I dunno about that," Web disagreed mildly. "He's got a good wife an' a fine girl; seems like he's havin' a right good time. I cal'late a feller can get used t' most anything, once he puts his mind to it."

"I'd rather be dead," Simon muttered. "Any time."

"Well," Web smiled, "the' ain't any minnie balls flyin' round these days, and I cal'late we'll have t' put up with ye for quite a while."

The stage crossed the bridge and pulled up as Simon and Web came out to the road. Simon shook hands with Perley and Henry. "I ain't seen you ridin' the stage for quite a while," he said to Henry.

"Oh, I'm ridin' right along, now, learnin' the route. Web tell ye I was taking the contract?"

"Eyah, and I'm glad to hear it; but we're goin' to miss ye, Perley."

Perley grinned. "You ain't home enough t' miss nobuddy, but seems as though ye was in a right smart hurry t' git here t'day."

"Looks like he's got ye there, Simon," Henry laughed. "Ye might just as well of waited for us—we see Wash an' Debby just gettin' home as we come along."

Simon was annoyed but he had to grin. They moved on to the store and he had another round of handshaking with men who were arriving. He was talking with Nathan Gregg and Roger Benton and Levi Scott when Charles Norton drove up, pert and straight for all his eighty-odd years. Simon always liked to hear Levi and Charles get to work on each other and, after a little, he said:

"Charles, I hear you're tryin' to sell your meadows."

"Sell my meadows! Why——" Charles cackled suddenly. "Dang ye, quit your jokin' an old feller! But if it's meadows you're lookin' fer, I'll tell ye sompin." He raised up on his toes and stretched his withered neck toward Simon's ear. "If ye want t' buy some meadows cheap," he whispered loudly, "talk t' Levi."

Levi Scott's chin whiskers bristled. "M-m-me?" he gobbled. "Huh—whu-hut ye talkin' about! I ain't su—huh—sellin' a d-dam' foot o' mine!"

"Why, Levi," Charles chided, "you told me you'd sell if I did!"

"Eyah, su—huh—so I did! B-b-but a m-man's wu—huh—word d-don't hold good wu—huh—wi-with a fool!"

"Heee, heee, heee," Charles cackled. "Oh, ho, ho! I didn't think ye had it in ye, Levi."

"Wu—huh—well, I g-got enough o' m-m-my daddy an' gran'-daddy in m-m-me t' know thu-thu—they had more su—huh—sense than I got!"

Charles bent double, wheezing with laughter. "Oh, dearie me! Oh, my Godfrey! Ye'll be the death o' me yet, Levi!"

"Whu—huh—" Levi beat his knuckles against his thigh "—when I g-g-git t' b-be as old as yuh—huh—ye be, I'll b-be g-glad t' die!"

"Huh?" Charles straightened up. "What's that? Why, dang ye, if ye live t' be as old as I be, they'll have t' sling your jaw in a hammick. Yes, sir, by Godfrey! It'll be worn clean off at the hinges!"

Levi opened his mouth. Then he closed it and shook his head and thumbed his nose at Charles. Simon recognized Freem Grant's voice in the laughter, and turned.

"Well," he grinned, "what's all this I hear about you?"

Freem smiled diffidently and his hand disappeared in Simon's. "Leave any the big woods behind ye up there, did ye?"

"Did we!" Simon laughed. "We ain't hardly marked 'em yet."

"'Y Godfrey," Henry Locke said, "they must be a sight. Always thought I'd like t' see 'em, and I cal'late I would if the war hadn't come along." He smiled. "Funny how things turn out. The' was Rob and me and Perry Gilson, over t' Jessup's Mills; all of us figurin' t' head upcountry time we got back from the war. But Rob didn't come back, and I got this." Henry moved the stump of his arm. "And Perry had the same thing happen to a leg. But who's going t' say we wouldn't of got off worse if we had got to the woods? The's a feller up t' Fairview got rolled on a brow; I see him when they brought him in this spring—all mashed out o' shape and got t' go on livin'. Godfrey. I was talkin' t' Perry about him an' we figured we was lucky. Eyah, we might of come out of it a sight worse if we'd got into the woods."

"Sure ye might," Simon said heartily, a little too heartily.

Henry looked at him and smiled dryly. "Oh, I ain't sayin',

if I had the chance, I wouldn't like t' try some things over—most anybuddy can think of things they'd like t' done diff'rent. But take it all around I cal'late the' ain't many'd want t' swap what they got fer somethin' they didn't have any more t' say about. And the closer," he chuckled, "ye git to fifty, the closer ye set t' what ye know—or the more ye git away from it. Well, it's time fer me t' git along and tend t' my chores. Glad you're back, Simon."

Simon watched him go to the door and shook his head and flexed his arms. "Too bad," he said to Freem. Then, "How's the new buildings comin'?"

"Good," Freem said. "Barn's all finished and the's only some inside tinkerin' t' do in the house."

"Figurin' to move in soon?"

Freem reddened a little. "I guess I could, all right, if I could just—get round to it."

"Mebby I can give ye a hand."

"Well——" Freem got a little redder, and grinned. "I guess," he said in a low voice, "it ain't so much a hand I need as—as a mouth."

Simon rocked with noiseless laughter. He saw Lish Morrison come out of the cuddy that served as a post office. Lish propped an elbow against a post that supported an overhead rack and leaned there talking to Web. Simon winked at Freem and stole behind Lish and clipped his elbow sharply. Lish squawked and toppled backward, down and down, and then Simon caught him and stood him up.

Lish turned and glowered at him, breathing fast. "If ye wa'n't," he exclaimed, "such a stringy—little squirt—I'd cuff ye!" Then he laughed and jabbed Simon playfully in the stomach. "What ye mean by goin' by and not stoppin'?"

"And wake ye up? Why——?"

"Now don't ye try t' come that on me! Don't ye try it. I wa'n't asleep."

"Wa'n't ye? Well—must of been a cat fight I heard, then."

Charles Norton yelped, "Got ye that time, Lish! Yes, sir, he got ye there!"

"Dang it, I wa'n't asleep! An' I don't snore when I am!"

"Course ye don't," Web said. "Who'd say a couple o' tomcats makin' love was snorin'?"

A new voice broke in. "If ye kep' the tomcats out o' your store and tended more t' folks, mebby ye'd have more business!"

"Oh, Veery, excuse me! I never see ye—an' you in such a hurry!" Lish's skinny legs sped behind the counter and into the small box of an office. "Here ye are—a letter an' the paper. I don't blame ye a mite fer bein' in such a hurry an' sayin' so—the's so much in the paper these days a body can't hardly wait t' git home an' read it."

Vera Perkins snatched her mail and flounced out the door. Lish peered out.

"She gone?" he whispered cautiously.

Charles Norton stared at Lish in open-mouthed admiration. "'Y gorry," he ejaculated, "if that wa'n't the slickest——" he cackled and slapped his leg. "She come right in an' she went right out! Kep' her on the run, ye did. 'Y Godfrey, I never see the beat of it. And her nose—hee-heee—a-wigglin' just like a rabbit's! Oh, dearie me, heeee-heeee—tomcats, she says; clear out the tomcats. Lish, I never heard ye snore in my life—no more'n a baby. Now ain't that true, boys? Ye——" Charles brought up with a jerk. "Dang it! Here I be a-goin' on 'most as bad as Veery. P'int me at the door, Simon, an' gimme a shove."

Simon took him by the seat of his pants and his stringy old neck and walked him out to his wagon. He swung Charles gently up on the seat and untied the horse and watched Charles start for home cackling with laughter.

24

"Well," Simon said to Susan, when he and Web came home, "I guess I saw near half the town, down around the store, and goin' home with Freem we found Ida out front talkin' with Sarah. Sarah said Marvin was down to the factory and we found him and Otis and Lester down there with Aussy, boxin' up cheeses." Simon smiled and breathed deeply. "Feels kind of good to get home."

He followed Web to the back entry and they started for the barn with the milk pails. Going along the walkway, something struck Simon in the back of his neck. It felt cold and wet, as if a large pulpy bug had flown into him and burst. He put up his hand to wipe it off, and heard a snicker behind him. He turned, and again something wet and cold struck him, this time on the chin. A shadowy movement in the woodshed caught his eye, and he called:

"Hey there!"

"Eyah?" Web stopped and looked back.

Simon started to speak, and was struck a third time, directly in the mouth. It partly strangled him, and Web laughed suddenly.

"What is it?" Simon coughed.

"The boys," Web laughed.

"Eyah, I know that. But what in time——?" Simon saw something coming and jerked his head, but not quickly enough and was struck on the cheek.

"That's enough now," Web said. "Come out o' there and show it to Simon."

Wallace and Ting appeared from the woodshed, doubled up with laughter. Wallace had a long, round yellowish thing in his hand, and Simon snorted. It was like the squirt guns that he and Web used to make, only larger.

Wallace handed it to him and he looked it over. It was a ten-inch joint nearly three inches in diameter, sawed from the butt of a big bamboo pole, and the handle stuck from one end like a thick tail.

"We never had one that'd shoot like this," Simon said to Web.

"Don't she shoot, though?" Wallace cried. "I most knocked Ting over with her once!"

Web came up and took the squirt gun. He twisted the rear plug off and pulled out the handle. "See?" he said. "I put a hole in the plunger and a flap valve over it. When the handle's in, the valve lays against the nozzle and keeps it from leakin'. And when ye want to squirt it, ye pull back on the handle an' shove it ahead, quick. The flap valve lets the water run through when ye pull it back, and keeps it ahead of the plunger when ye shove. Ye pull it back for what ye want—a little pull for a little squirt, and a big pull for a big squirt."

"Well, I be dang," Simon chuckled. He pulled the handle back about an inch and pushed, and half a gill of water burst from the nozzle, smacking against the wall some fifteen feet away. He pulled the handle all the way back and pushed again. A solid column of water struck the boards like buckshot.

Simon laughed like a boy. "Dang if ye can't hit a nail with it at twenty feet! Lend it to me, will ye?" he said to Wallace.

"Sure," Wallace told him. "What ye want her for?"

"Why——" Simon hesitated, and Web said, "Don't ask so many questions. You boys go get in your wood now."

The boys went back to the woodshed, and Web chuckled, "If you're figurin' t' use that on Wash this evenin', I cal'late I'll have t' go with ye—I ain't had a good laugh since we went smeltin' last spring."

"What was that?" Simon asked.

"Oh—it wa'n't s' much—just some dam' foolishness. The' was Henry and Levi and Ezra and Roger an' me. We took our carryall and went over t' Stony Brook. Nice moon but the smelt

didn't start runnin' till late. Right after we got there, Henry dipped up an eel. Ever see a one-armed feller try t' ketch an eel an' put it in a sack?" Web chuckled. "Well, I helped him and didn't think no more about it. It was around ten o'clock before we got all the smelt we wanted, and we started home. I was kind of sleepy an' I let Ezry drive. I guess I must have dozed off when Henry give me a dig. I heard him snicker and I come out of it. He's just as full of hell as he ever was and I had an idee he was up to something.

" 'Look at Levi,' he says. I looked back, an' there was Levi flat on his back with his head propped against the tail gate, purrin' away like an ol' tomcat. I never see a brighter moon, but we didn't need it to see that Levi was gone—just didn't know nothin'.

"Well"—Web chuckled again—"Henry run his hand down in his sack and by an' by he come out with the eel. 'You hold his pants open,' he says t' me, 'while I slide this critter into 'em.' " Web's shoulders shook. " 'Y Godfrey, it just kind of hit my funny bone. Levi had on a pair of them new high-top gum boots. They was turned down but his pants was shoved inside 'em. And he had a belt on with straps hangin' to it t' hold up the tops of the boots. The eel was gettin' away from Henry and I told him he better give him t' me. I got a head-an'-tail holt on him and we eased over t' Levi. Henry loosened his belt and lifted out his pants and I shot the eel into 'em."

Web snorted. "The critter went down Levi's leg like a night-walker into its hole—just a little quicker 'n chain lightning. Zip! Just like that. And he started windin' an' twistin' around Levi's knee. Levi's upper lip started jerkin'. It'd flip up, an' flap down, an' he'd blow—phoo-oo, and she'd flip up again. Then he shivered and kind of jerked all over, shufflin' his feet an' stretchin' out his hands like he was feelin' for something and didn't know where t' reach. About that time, the eel started back and man, he was movin'! I yanked Levi's belt up half a dozen notches an' turned the critter. And right then, Levi come out of it.

" 'Whu-whu—huh—whu——' and then he yelled and went up in the air, and if he hadn't had them boots on he'd of jumped

clean out of his pants!" Web's shoulders shook again. "Godfrey, Peter! If Levi'd had nine hands he could of used 'em all! I reckon a feller's pants never did come down quicker, but it wa'n't quick enough for Levi. The critter had bored on in and got wound up in his shirt tail and drawers—and him with his tongue tangled worse 'n the eel, a whoo-hooin' an' sus-sooin'—you talk about a cat fight! Oh, my Godfrey—rip an' cuss, cuss an' rip. When he got through, both his shirts was gone, clean t' the armpits, and all that was left of his drawers was a pair of anklets!"

Simon looped an arm across Web's shoulders and laughed till the tears ran down his face. After a little, Simon said:

"One o' these days I'll have to ask Levi what happened to the eel."

"Don't ye," Web told him. "He'll blow right up in your face like a dynamite cap."

They went on to the barn. Sixteen head of cattle stood in the tie-up: three pairs of steers and ten cows; and four calves thrust shiny black noses through the boards of the calf pen and blatted. Neck chains rattled, a cow lowed, and across the central alleyway three horses nickered.

"Ye got enough stock, seems as though," Simon remarked.

"Eyah. It takes plenty milk t' make cheese an', come fall, we're figurin' t' start makin' butter. We figure the more we have t' ship, the more we'll have t' say about freight rates. About all our cash money comes from what we ship out of here now, and we figure to have somebody from here in the legislature that'll keep the rates down."

Simon grunted. "Don't do any figurin' that I'll do any talkin' for ye."

"You wait till you've talked t' Pa," Web said, "before ye make up your mind. They could start jumpin' lumber rates on ye just as easy, and where'd ye be then?"

Simon remembered what Brink had told him about Jed Sawyer. It set him to thinking. Web smiled faintly and turned to the barn pump, pumped some water in a pail and went from cow to cow, washing their bags with a cloth.

"Kit-kit-kit," he called. "You, Martha! If ye want some supper ye better come a-runnin'."

A big gray cat came bounding in from the center alleyway and curled around Web's legs with short squeaky sounds of pleased anticipation.

"Watch this," Web said to Simon. He picked up his milking stool and sat down by the first cow with the pail between his knees. He laid his cheek against the cow's flank and played tunes on the pail's bottom. The cat sat a short distance to one side, watching drowsily. Web leaned back, and said:

"All right, Martha."

Martha's eyes opened alertly. She moved a few inches nearer and opened her mouth. Web shot a stream of milk into it and Martha blinked and made breathless gulping noises. Sometimes the milk struck her on the nose and sometimes in the ear, but she didn't seem to mind so long as most of it reached her mouth.

Simon watched her, grinning. Then he went to the pump and filled the squirt gun. He came up beside Web, and asked, "How much do ye give her, for gosh sake? She looks ready to bust now."

"She does look full, but mebby it's kittens," Web grinned. "How about it, old gal?"

Martha blinked her green eyes and swayed sleepily, but kept her mouth open. Simon trained the squirt gun on it and drove out a good-sized mouthful. It struck her on the nose with a wet slap. Her head went back and she let out a choked squall and bounded into the air, spitting. When she landed, her feet seemed nothing but claws, her back was bowed and her tail four times its normal size.

Web glanced over his shoulder at Simon. "Dang ye," he laughed, "ye ought t' be ashamed of yourself."

"Yeow," Martha said, and sneezed.

"Eyah," Web told her, "you're dam' right. Ye ought t' land in the middle of his back and drag off some hide for that."

"Yeow," Martha repeated, but with much less spleen. Her claws drew in and her back came down and the swelling went out of her tail. *"Yeow,"* she said again, a little plaintively, and sat down and opened her mouth.

"Well, I'll be dogged," Simon chuckled. "That cat's 'most human. Where's all the others ye used to have?"

"Martha run 'em off. She come just before the snow went off

last spring, ga'nt as a file. Dunno where she come from, but she seemed t' like it around here and she stayed. An' didn't she fight! Seemed as though the' wa'n't nothin' but fights the next few days. I set out t' kill her, but Susan an' the boys wouldn't let me, and it wa'n't a week till she was the only cat on the place. I was sorry I hadn't killed her; and then I see she was keepin' the rats an' mice down better'n all the rest of 'em had done t'gether. Just a natural born hunter; so don't ye go t' plaguin' her any more—I don't want to lose her."

Simon smiled. "You'd ought to told me sooner. I thought she was just a cat." He stooped and held out his hand. "Come here, Martha."

Martha looked at him a moment and then padded to him and butted her head against his hand. Simon stroked her.

"Come on," he said, "we'll go feed the stock."

He went through to the center alleyway and Martha trotted beside him. It was nearly sundown and the barn was getting dark. Martha suddenly darted ahead, disappearing by the feed bins. Simon heard a thud and a squeak, and Martha came trotting toward him with a mouse in her mouth.

"Good girl," Simon told her, and stooped and rubbed her head. She arched her back, dropped the mouse and rubbed against him, purring.

"Hey, Web," Simon called. "Martha's just caught a mouse."

"Heave it out the back door," Web said. "She never eats 'em—always leaves what she catches in a pile by the feed bins. Ain't she the—— So-o-o, now; stan' quiet," he said to the cow.

Simon climbed the ladder to the mow. The little hay that was left was back under the eaves, and he found a fork and gathered a great bunch of it and tumbled it down to the floor.

"R-r-r-ro-o-ow," expostulated Martha.

"What's the matter now?" Simon laughed. He went to the edge of the mow and looked down, and there was Martha, well up the ladder, enveloped in streamers of hay. Simon reached down with the fork and twitched it off her, and she clawed her way swiftly to the mow.

"Yow," she said, short and sharp.

"Eyah," Simon agreed. "That sure was a hell of a way to treat

a lady. Now you get over there out o' the way." When he'd thrown down enough hay, he went to the ladder. "You comin' down with me?" he inquired.

"Younh," Martha replied. She waited till he had descended several rungs and then stepped confidently on his shoulder. He went down carefully and she leaped to the floor. He watched her glide off toward the feed bins, tail high and curling.

"Martha," he said, "you ain't a cat; you're one of them transmogrified souls the Revrund Melcher used to talk about. Eyah, some farmer's wife's got into you, and she was a mighty smart woman."

Every little while, as he parceled out the hay and grain and watered the stock, Simon would look around for Martha and chuckle. He had a tussle with the calves, retrieving two milk pails that Web had set in the pen. The calves were full of milk and high spirits and their heads were hard.

"It's a good thing you're startin' hayin' soon," Simon remarked. "The' ain't much hay left in the mow."

"Don't I know it!" Web said soberly. "And how we're goin' t' feed a dozen extry cows next winter, I just can't figure."

"You ain't buyin' more?"

"Pa has—it takes milk t' make cheese an' butter."

Simon grunted and started for the house with two pails of milk.

25

THE sun had set before they finished supper and the whole western sky was full of afterglow, a mass of vermilion and rose and gold, shot with streaks of blue and purple and apple-green. Simon stood at the back-entry door watching the colors merge and change. Displays like this always stirred something in him. How many times he had stood in the old dooryard watching the sunset with his mother! He could see her as clearly as if she were beside him now. Then she was gone, and Debby was there. A queer feeling, hot and cold, ran through him. He turned abruptly to Web.

"How long's it take ye to strain that milk?"

"Just as long as it takes t' run through," Web grinned. "Don't get in a hurry—give Wash a chance t' get there."

Lightning bugs were flashing in the grass when they started for the Grants' and other lights gleamed steadily from windows. Web slapped at a mosquito.

They stepped along in the soft warm twilight. A half-moon hung above them, infinitely far away, and pale, like a piece of silver.

"I don't feel rightly human t'night," Web said. "I feel more like rollin' in the grass like a dog—or a fox."

Simon grinned. The spell of the evening was on him, too, and he felt again the hot and cold tingle run through him. He put his hand in his pocket. The squirt gun was still right side up and heavy with water.

"You reckon Wash'll be there?" he asked.

"You know he will. A busted leg wouldn't keep him away, now that you're back home."

Simon quickened his pace and Web kept step with him. The bridge planks gave out hollow echoing sounds from their boot heels. They went up the slope and around the turn. A current of air, warm and caressing, seemed to spring from nowhere. It drove away the mosquitoes that had followed them from the stream.

The only light they could see at the Grants' was in the barn.

"Looks like the women folks had run off somewheres," Web remarked.

They were passing the Greggs' and looked in the windows. "Not in there, anyhow," Simon said.

"Mebby they're over t' our place," Web said. "Or they might be up the hill lookin' at what Freem's done the last couple days."

"Well," Simon said. "Marvin or Freem's in the barn and we can find out where they are. Ye don't reckon Debby's gone out with Wash again?"

"Not likely—but ye never can tell."

They walked into the Grants' dooryard, and there in the shadowed angle of the ell, three people sat; Debby and Sarah in rockers and Wash on the well cover, leaning against the pump.

"Hello," Debby called. "Come see our new parlor." She raised her hand, beckoning. In their white dresses, she and Sarah had a ghostly look.

"Bring out some chairs," Sarah told them. "It's too nice out here to sit inside."

"Oh, they didn't come to see us," Debby said. "Pa's in the barn, and Freem'll be back in a little while—he's up the hill with Margaret."

"I guess we'll wait here for 'em," Simon said. "The grass'll suit me fine."

"Same here," Web said, and they sat down and leaned against the house.

Simon and Wash looked at each other, but didn't speak. Wash moved his shoulders against the pump and crossed his legs. Web leaned forward, peering.

"Why, that you over there, Wash?" his voice sounded mildly surprised. "You're s' much the color of the pump I thought it was a coat hanging there. How ye like your new boardin' place?"

"What new boarding place?" Wash asked, a little truculently.

"Why, ain't ye boardin' here now?"

Sarah put her hand to her mouth, and Debby gripped the arms of her chair. Simon glanced at them uneasily, as Wash said:

"Me? Where'd ye get that idee?"

"Well, ye might say I didn't get the idee," Web answered. "Seein' ye around here most the time, it just kind of got rubbed into me."

"Then ye can rub it out again," Wash told him.

Simon chuckled suddenly. "Looks like it was about time to put on our rubbers." He had the squirt gun on his knee, hidden by his hand and wrist, and he moved his leg, training the gun on Wash.

"I wish you boys would behave," Debby said, a little petulantly.

Simon moved his leg again, bringing the gun to bear on her. He pulled back on the handle, ever so little, and shot a thimbleful at her.

"Oh," she exclaimed, and put her hand to her cheek. "What was that?"

Wash's long legs hitched him upright like jointed stilts. His arm went out tautly at Web. "I see ye," he said. "Get up!"

"Eyah," Web drawled. "I can see you, too. But I ain't braggin' about it." He leaned forward, looking at Wash, but made no effort to rise.

Wash came to him with swift, jerky strides and stood over him, poised tensely. "I see ye spit. Get up from there before I kick——" he sputtered, half-strangled, as a cupful of water struck him in the mouth and nose. He coughed. Another cupful struck him and he made queer gulping sounds.

Simon heard Debby catch her breath. Sarah laughed. Web drew his feet up under him and squatted, grinning at Wash. The pale moonlight gave Wash's face a diabolic cast. He rubbed his sleeve across his mouth and cleared his throat.

Sarah laughed again. "You did see something, Wash," she said. "But it came from a squirt gun. Simon, what on earth'll you be doing next?"

"This," he said, and sent what remained in the gun between Wash's eyes.

Wash snarled something unintelligible and caught at his hat.

"Just like a bobcat," Web muttered happily.

"Oh," Debby cried. "I think you're the rudest things I ever saw! Both of you! If you can't be nice, I wish you'd go away!"

Simon could scarcely believe his ears. What had come over Debby? She'd always been ready to laugh at such things, and now she was mad. It made him feel queer, as if he'd lost something that couldn't be replaced. Standing up for Wash like that must mean——

He wet his lips and stood up, and his voice had an empty flatness, when he said, "Come on, Web; seems as though Debby don't like jokin' any more and I guess we better get goin'."

He turned away and Debby whipped from her chair and ran to him. "Give me that thing," she said breathlessly, and tried to snatch the squirt gun.

Involuntarily, he held it behind him. She hesitated, then grappled him. Her breast pressed against him and her arms went around him, reaching for the gun. Her fingers worked down his arms but couldn't reach his hands.

"Oh, you," she cried. "Give it to me!"

Simon kept it from her. The softly firm pressure of her body, the grip of her arms fiercely straining about him, the faint sweet smell that came from her, made him hold his breath.

"Debby!" Sarah protested mildly.

Debby paid no attention to her, and hot and cold waves began to run through Simon. Wash growled something, and Debby twisted her face toward him, and cried:

"Oh, Wash, come help me. Help me take it away from him and we'll squirt him with it!"

Wash told her thickly, "I'll do my own squirtin'. I'll be back tomorra. Tomorra afternoon," he added with emphasis, and strode off to the road.

Debby made another futile attempt to get the squirt gun. Then she relaxed and tilted up her face. "If you don't give me that thing, I'll—I'll bite you!"

This was better, but still unlike Debby. Simon very nearly laughed, but it stuck in his throat. He freed his arms from her relaxed grasp and brought them around her, yet not touching

her. Her expression made him revert to the teasings of years ago.

"Where ye want it?" he inquired. "Down your neck or in your eye?"

All at once her arms went up and out over his, bringing them down and locking them against her sides, and she called, "Quick, Ma, get it!"

Sarah laughed a little shortly. "You started it; you can finish it."

Debby's lips came together. Then she smiled, "All right, I will!"

Her arms dropped, swung back and flashed up, one and then the other. Simon saw them coming but made no attempt to dodge; he was too much surprised. Her palms jarred and stung his jaws, and their impacts sounded in his ears like a pair of pistol shots. He looked at her in amazement. Little Debby—gentle little Debby, hitting out like a man!

A tight look came into her face. He couldn't see it clearly in the pale moonlight but her lips seemed to tremble with anger. Her hands came up against his chest and she drew in a tremulous breath.

"Oh-o," she gasped. "I hate you!"

She pushed against him, but he stood like a block of wood. He felt like a block of wood.

"Oh, let me go!" she panted.

Simon glanced down and saw that his arms were still against her sides where she had pulled them. Slowly, woodenly, he opened them. She gave a quick push against him and ran to the kitchen door, slamming it behind her.

Simon stood there, watching woodenly, after she had disappeared. A hand touched his arm and he looked down. Sarah stood at his elbow.

"Oh, Simon," she said. "I'm so sorry. I can't think what's got into Debby. I'm sure she didn't mean what she said. It's just something that's upset her—she's been nervous as a witch all evenin'."

Simon swallowed. "I guess it's just that she—well, she's changed."

"Not like that," Sarah said. "She—oh, here comes Freem and Marg'ret."

Simon turned, and Margaret saw him and called out gaily. She ran to him and pulled his head down and kissed him.

"I'm so glad to see you," she cried, and gave him a hug. "The nicest thing's just happened—Freem's asked me to marry him! And we're going to be married next week, just as soon as the house is finished!"

"Well, that's fine—just fine," Simon told her, and patted her shoulder.

Margaret was too happy to notice his tone. Sarah kissed her and then kissed Freem. Web shook hands with them, and rumbled:

"Looks kind of crowded around here for folks that's just fixed things up. But we was just goin', anyhow. Come on, Simon." He hooked his arm in Simon's and hurried him away.

Freem and Margaret started to protest, but stopped when Sarah spoke to them, and Simon and Web went on to the road in silence. There, Web squeezed Simon's arm and said in a savage tone:

"If I'd only had the sense that God give a snake! I'd ought t' knowed I couldn't light into Wash like that, the way things was."

"It wa'n't your fault," Simon said heavily. "Any part of it."

Web snorted. "It was me that got her mad—talkin' t' Wash that way. If I'd kep' my fool mouth shut, she'd of laughed when ye let go with the squirt gun. It just makes me——" his voice ran on in a savage rumble.

"Go ahead an' cuss," Simon told him, "if it'll do ye any good. But it would of ended just the same if ye hadn't said a word. Debby was—well, she just wanted to show me how things stood. And it just worked out so she could do a good job of it."

Web shook his head. "I'll never believe it. I'd bet anything I got that she still likes you better'n she does Wash—a hell of a lot better!"

"No," Simon said. "She's changed. I don't mean just takin' up with Wash. She's—she's diff'rent." Simon drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "So I guess it's turned out for the best after all."

Web's only answer was a grunting rumble and they walked on home in silence.

The boys were in bed and Susan was knitting under the hanging lamp when Simon and Web came in. Back to, she looked so much like Debby that Simon shut his eyes.

"What are you home so early for?" she asked.

They didn't answer, and she turned. The light shone on Simon's face, and her eyes widened. "Why—" she rose quickly—"why, what——?"

"To much of a crowd," Web said, and managed a smile. "Freem got his tongue unraveled t'night and him and Marg'ret's gettin' married next week."

Susan's face brightened. "Oh," she cried, but turned back to Simon, still concerned.

"Kind of tired," he said. "Guess I'll turn in."

Susan started to speak, but Web caught her eyes and shook his head. Simon picked up his turkey, and she said:

"Oh, I'm sorry. I—I hope you feel fine in the morning. Good night."

"Night," Simon answered, and headed upstairs for his room.

Soft moonlight came through the open windows and outlined the familiar room. Simon dropped his turkey on the floor and sat on the edge of the bed, his hands hanging limply between his knees. After a time he straightened up and gave his head a shake and stood up and took off his clothes. He stretched out on the bed and pulled the sheet over him. The patches of moonlight shifted on the floor, growing narrower on the south and wider on the west. Simon lay there staring at the ceiling.

His watch ticked loudly under his pillow. It seemed to be the only sound in the world. He couldn't lie there any longer and he sat up. He had to get out and walk, and he dressed and carried his shoes downstairs so he wouldn't waken Web or Susan. The moon was low when he started up the road. As he neared the cemetery recollection came to him, recollection of another night, long years ago, when he'd gone to stand beside his mother's grave and found Debby there.

He turned in through the cemetery gate, his heart beating a little faster. His mother's headstone seemed very white, much whiter than the others, and there were flowers by it, fresh flowers, and the grass was freshly cut. Simon fingered his throat,

trying to rub out the hard sore feeling. He heard a sound that stopped his breath and sent his heart in a rib-shaking leap. Something was moving near him, the same sort of rustle he'd heard that other night so long ago. He turned slowly, trembling all over, his arms partly lifted in readiness to snatch Debby to him. But there was no one there, anywhere behind him, and the rustling had been very close. Then he heard it again, almost at his feet, and something soft rubbed against his leg. He looked down.

"Martha!" he said, in a husky, broken voice, and he stooped and picked up the cat and buried his face in her fur.

Simon spent the next few days in the woods alone, walking, walking. Then he took to the boat. On his first trip upstream he broke three of the four old oars and had to paddle home. Emory Davenport gave him four planks to make new oars; dry three-inch ash that he used in his wagon business. Simon put the twelve-foot planks on his shoulder and took them home and hewed them down with Web's ax. When he had them roughly shaped to size he got to work with the draw shave. He had finished the first pair and was matching them for balance when Susan called him in to dinner. He wasn't hungry; he hadn't been hungry for days, but he went in. They were still at the table when Freem came in.

"Sit down and have some dinner," Web invited.

Freem shook his head and smiled. "Much obliged, but I've already et; and I got t' get on up t' the house." His smile took a diffident twist. "Figurin' t' finish the stair railin' this afternoon."

"Need some help?" Simon asked.

"No; much obliged; I just stopped by t' tell ye that Debby'd like to see ye, if ye can get over there this afternoon."

Something like a great wind swept through Simon. He didn't dare to think. He had to get out and do something. "Much obliged," he said. "I'll be over." And he got up and went out and struck back through the pasture. Debby wanted to see him, she wanted to see him! But he kept on walking, hurrying away, driven by an indefinable dread. Then his pace began to slacken, and presently he stopped. If she wanted to see him, he had to

go to her. He cut through the cemetery to the road and across it to the tannery dam. Coming up around the starch factory to the Parkers' lane, something pulled his eyes toward his old home and he saw Wash striding down across the field to intercept him. They met in the lane.

Wash was pale and drawn, and behind the smokiness in his eyes was something Simon had never seen before. He spoke quietly, without truculence.

"You headin' for the Grants'?" he asked.

Simon nodded.

"To see Debby?"

Simon nodded again.

Wash wet his lips. Then he said, "I been watchin' to head ye off. Debby ain't well—it's like the spunk had all run out of her—and we was comin' along fine till that night. I know she used to like ye—mighty well. I—" Wash wet his lips again—"I cal'late we all did. I used to think I'd give anything to be like ye. That was when I thought ye was my full brother. And when I found ye wa'n't—well, it kind of busted up something I'd set a lot of store by." A look almost of pleading came into Wash's eyes.

"I'm figurin' that the way I felt then," he went on, "is kind of like the way Debby's feelin' now. But I got over it, and Debby'll get over it if you'll leave her be. So I'm askin' ye to stay away from her."

Simon was almost too dumfounded to take it all in. Wash acknowledging a liking for him, and asking a favor—such a favor! It didn't seem possible, but he had to believe it. A new and friendly feeling made him lift his hand to Wash's shoulder. Then he shook his head and took his hand away.

"Debby sent word, just now," he said, "that she wanted to see me."

Wash's mouth tightened. Then he said, "But ye don't have to go."

"Eyah," Simon said. "I got to. She sent for me, and I got to go."

The old smoky look leaped into Wash's eyes. He said hotly,

"You got no feelin's for anybody! Ye don't care what happens to anybody but yourself!"

"I'm carin' what happens to Debby," Simon told him. "But I wouldn't worry, if I was you—she showed mighty plain how it stood the other night."

Wash's long nose quivered and his eyes gleamed momentarily. But he said, "You stay away from her. I ain't askin' ye, now—I'm tellin' ye." He pulled Temp's old derringer from his pocket. "This wa'n't loaded the other time I held it on ye, but it's loaded now and I'm usin' it on ye if——"

Simon gave a short laugh. "And get yourself hung for murder? That would be a fine thing for Debby. You better put that thing in your pocket and come along with me. We'll let Debby say what she wants—if she wants to see me, I'll see her; if she don't, I won't."

Simon started up the lane. Wash hesitated, then dropped the gun in his pocket and fell in behind. Simon saw Ida watching them from the window as they passed the Parkers' kitchen, but he glanced away without a sign that he had seen her. When they reached the road, Wash came up beside him and strode along with him to the Grants' back entry.

Wash stepped ahead quickly and knocked. Sarah came to the door. She looked from one to the other uncertainly, almost fearfully.

"Did Debby send word to Simon that she wanted to see him?" Wash asked.

Sarah looked relieved. "Eyah, she sent Freem, right after dinner."

Wash blinked as if he were surprised. But he turned quickly as Simon moved forward. "Wait," he said, and turned back to Sarah. "Would ye mind askin' her if she still wants to see him?"

"Why—" uncertainty returned to Sarah's eyes—"why, no. I'll ask her."

She hurried off. Wash glanced at Simon, and Simon looked at him, partly curious, but mostly not caring what he did. He had a novel feeling of detachment, as if he were off somewhere looking at himself and Wash, with Debby very hazy in the distance.

"If you're thinkin' of goin' in without you're asked," Wash said, "ye better quit it." His eyes were hard and narrow and his hands were taut in his pockets.

A reckless feeling came over Simon to go in and see if Wash would shoot. A sudden revulsion stopped him; it would be too cheap a thing to do. He gave Wash a small bitter smile, and said:

"I'll save ye the trouble of goin' to court."

Wash's eyes flickered and then turned to the door as light steps came across the kitchen. They were Sarah's, and she spoke to Wash.

"Debby has something to say to Simon," she said. "But she'll see you afterward."

Wash wet his lips. He looked at Simon and nodded toward the door. But his eyes pinched together significantly when he said, "I'll be waitin'."

26

"She's in her room," Sarah said.

Simon nodded. Debby's room, he knew, was in the southeast corner of the house, immediately beyond the kitchen. Her door opened on the sitting room and he made his way to it. It was open but the room was so changed from what he remembered that he stopped. He hadn't seen it for some fifteen years; not since the time he and Freem had hung sheep bells to her bed springs. A lump came to Simon's throat; Debby had been a lot of fun in those days. But she had changed—as her room had changed. It was full of ruffles and fluffy things; pictures on the walls; an art square on the floor, softly brown, almost the color of the new curly-maple bureau. The bureau had a white cover with frilled edges, and above it hung a mirror.

And in the mirror he saw Debby's reflection. She was propped up on the bed, watching him in the mirror. Her dark hair and the two red spots in her cheeks made vivid contrasts with the pillows and the pale honey color of her face. She was like a picture, framed by the soft brown curly maple of the headboard.

"Come in," she called faintly, and slipped from the bed.

Simon hesitated. She came toward the door, and only then did he realize that she was fully dressed, even to her shoes.

He went slowly to her. "Ye—ye wanted to see me?" he asked.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry; sorry that I—" her eyes closed—"that I hit you." Her lids pinched together and Simon saw tears squeeze out between them.

He exclaimed softly, "Why, Debby; that wa'n't anything to be sorry about."

Her eyes opened and two large tears ran down her cheeks. "But I—I hated it," she said. "I—I can't explain why I did it, but I've been hating myself ever since. And I lied when I told you I hated you—I don't hate you at all."

"Well, you can stop hating yourself right now," Simon told her, and smiled. "I'd forgot all about gettin' slapped. But I'm glad ye did it—it kind of woke me up."

Debby's lips quivered. "Woke you—up?" she whispered.

"Eyah." Simon spoke a little grimly. "It showed me I—well, that I couldn't have my own way all the time."

Color flooded Debby's face and then she went pale. Her eyes were great gray pools as they looked up at him.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked faintly.

Simon cleared his throat, but his voice was still husky, when he said, "No use tellin' ye now—I've already made enough trouble for ye."

Debby leaned forward. "But you must tell me!" she said.

"No." Simon shook his head. "When a girl's fixin' to get married it would only make trouble if another feller put his oar in."

Debby's eyes widened and she flushed from her neck to the roots of her hair. "But I'm not!" she cried. "I'm not fixing to get married."

Simon's head whirled. "Ye—ain't figurin' to—marry Wash?"

She shook her head. She was pale again and Simon was dizzily on fire.

"I—I thought once that I might marry him," she said. "But I—found that I couldn't. And I'm sorry; because I like Wash—I like him very much." She smiled wistfully. "But I'd have to love him better than anything else in the world—and I don't."

"Then——" Simon swallowed and spoke with difficulty. "Mebby the's—would the'—be any chance for me?"

Debby's wistful smile deepened and she shook her head. "I'm afraid not," she told him. "You see, I'd expect a man to love me better than anything else—and you couldn't do that—you——"

Simon interrupted her in a queer tight voice. "What makes ye think I couldn't?"

Debby looked at him. Finally she said, "Because you're—different from most people."

"Diff'rent?"

"Yes." She reached out and laid her hand over his heart. "In here. You're just a boy in here, Simon. You couldn't leave the woods for any woman."

Simon couldn't speak. He just looked at her. Then he put his hand over hers. Her fingers turned and fastened on his thumb, just as they used to do when she was little, and all at once he knew.

"Eyah," he whispered. "I could leave the woods—if it was the only way I could get ye."

She went deathly white. Then her eyes closed and she swayed over against him, limply. Simon was frightened. He caught her up to him and sat on the bed and held her on his lap.

"Debby!" he said, and listened for the rattle in her breath like his mother used to have in her heart attacks. Debby's breathing was uneven, but there was no rattle in her throat and he could hear the sturdy beat of her heart. "Debby!" he said again, and bent down and pressed his face against hers. "Oh, little Debby!" he whispered. "I'd stay out of the woods the rest of my life—if it would do ye any good!"

He felt a quiver run through her. Then her hands came up to his face and she held it away and looked at him. What she saw brought tears to her eyes. Her arms slipped up around his neck and pulled him fiercely to her.

"Oh, Simon," she whispered. "I love you so—I love you so!"

His arms closed about her, and she gasped, "Not so tight—I can't breathe."

Simon was all in a whirl. There was nobody else in the world but himself and Debby, and they were spinning, spinning. He held her closely, but carefully. Neither of them stirred for a long time, then Debby lifted her head and smiled at him, a dreamy, damp-eyed smile.

Simon smiled back at her. An idea had come to him but he'd been afraid to voice it, afraid he'd break the spell and wake up to find it had all been a dream. He was still a little fearful, when he said:

"How about us—standin' up with Freem and Marg'ret—gettin' married along with them?"

Debby's color changed from a faint flush to white and then to

scarlet in swift succession. She gave a happy little nod and raised herself in his arms and kissed him on the mouth. After a little, Simon carried her to the large rocker. He moved it with his foot to face the windows and sat down, carefully, snuggling her up to him on his lap. After another long time Simon's arms tightened a little, and he muttered:

" 'Y gorry!"

"What is it?" Debby whispered.

"I just remembered," he said. "Wash is out there waitin'."

"Oh." A pitying look came into Debby's face and her eyes glistened damply. "Poor Wash. I wish he—— What can we do, Simon?"

"I guess we better go out an' tell him."

Debby's look of distress deepened. "Oh, no! I couldn't tell him now—today! I want to keep today just for us!"

"Well——" Simon didn't know what to say.

"Can't we go somewhere—out the front door, without anybody seeing us?"

"Why, I guess we could. But it don't seem hardly——"

Debby didn't let him finish. She slipped from his lap and caught his hand. "Come on," she said, and started for the door.

Simon didn't think it was right, but it was a relief not to face Wash again today—in the present circumstances. They went through the house on tiptoes, Debby in the lead and Simon following her with a sort of guilty eagerness. He opened the front door a little at a time, and closed it softly after them. The house hid them from the kitchen angle where Wash was waiting, and they cut across the dooryard and went down the road to the Parkers'.

"How about goin' upstream in the boat?" Simon suggested.

"Oh, let's! I've never been up there with just you."

Ida was still in the kitchen window, knitting, as they walked down the lane. Simon saw her eyes grow round, but this time he grinned at her and waved.

"There's Ida," he said, and Debby laughed and waved.

Ida half rose from her chair, then settled back and beamed at them. After crossing the dam, Simon took Debby a short distance down the stream and then up through the pasture back of

the town hall. They crossed the road there and took the valley road between the church and cemetery. Web had bought the twenty acres of pasture land that adjoined his place and ran north between the meadow brook and the cemetery, and Simon and Debby came around through the pasture and stopped behind Web's barn.

"You wait here a minute," he told her, "and I'll get the oars."

He sneaked through the barn and wagon house to the woodshed, got the nearly finished oars and sneaked back.

"Never saw a soul," he chuckled to Debby.

She giggled like a little girl and skipped along beside him to the bend in the stream above the mill where he had left the boat.

For two miles above the village the stream had very little fall. And along this stretch of valley bottom were the meadows, the flat interval lands that were covered every spring with several feet of water. Here and there points of higher land pushed to the banks of the stream, and between these timbered points were the meadows, some large, some small, and all covered with a mixture of sharp-edged marsh grass and the taller, more succulent blue-joint. Cattle didn't fatten on it, but mixed with other hay it would keep them through the winter.

Simon was rowing past one of the larger meadows, when Debby laughed, "Remember the meadow hen—the day you graduated from school?"

"I was thinkin' about it yesterday," he told her, and they laughed together.

He could laugh about it now but yesterday he'd been a long way from laughing. He glanced over the meadow, and remembered what Web had said about hay. Here was hay, plenty of it, every meadow with a road leading to it; but it all belonged to people who cut it for themselves. It came to Simon then, that he and Web owned a meadow, some twenty-five acres along the edge of the Christmas-tree lot they had bought so many years ago. He told Debby about it and looked at his watch.

"Not quite three," he said. "We can make it up and back by five, if ye feel like goin' that far."

Debby smiled. "Go just as far as you want to," she said softly.

He had to pull the boat over one beaver dam but he made the

four miles in less than an hour. Up there, six miles above the village, the land was enough higher to grow more blue-joint than marsh grass. Simon was pleased as he looked it over.

"If you want to see," he grinned, "where I'll be sweatin' in a couple of weeks, just stand up and take a look."

Debby stood up but her eyes didn't linger on the meadow. "What fun," she laughed. "I'll come up with you and we'll have picnic dinners!"

"For two-three weeks?"

She laughed at him. "You can't scare me that way."

"How about mosquitoes?" he grinned. "They're kind of bad up here."

She made a face at him. "I can stand it if you can."

"Might rig ye out in boots an' pants and head net and gloves."

Debby's eyes wavered and she flushed. Then she looked at him steadily. "I'll wear anything you say—when we're married." Then she qualified, still further, "When there's just the two of us around."

Simon laughed. "I won't hold ye to it, but I'll be right glad of your comp'ny when ye feel like comin' along." He blew a mosquito from his nose. "Reckon we better make some breeze before these critters fly off with us."

They sat down and Simon drove the oars into the water. The blades sent small whirlpools astern and Simon was glad they were new and strong. The boat gathered momentum and a pleasant gurgling set in under the lifted bow. It was just five o'clock when Simon eased the boat into the landing he had made at the bend. He pulled in the oars and stepped out, moved the boat along till he could reach Debby and swung her out and up in his arms.

"Oh, don't," she cried. "Somebody'll see us!"

He laughed and kissed her. She squirmed, and he kissed her till she lay quiet. "Now will ye be good?" he grinned.

She nodded and held his head to her a moment. "Now put me down before somebody does see us."

Simon put her down and she ran lightly ashore. He tied the boat and shouldered the oars and joined her. When they came to the barn, he said, "It's just about chore time. How about

comin' in the barn and seein' Web feed Martha—or would ye rather go back the way we come?"

"Let's go see Martha. But we won't tell anybody about us. And then you can go down to the dam with me and I'll go on home alone."

Simon's eyes twinkled. "Anything you say."

He steadied Debby over the split-rail fence and they walked between rows of young corn to the dooryard. Nobody was in the barn but they heard the boys in the woodshed and a rattle of milk pails in the back entry. A moment later, Web came out to the walkway. He stopped in mid-stride at the woodshed door and stared at Simon and Debby. Then he began to grin and the grin widened as he came out to them. He stopped and boomed over his shoulder:

"Oh, Susan!"

The boys popped out of the woodshed but saw it was only Simon and Debby and went to their chores again.

"Well," Web said, "it's nice t' see ye out again, Debby."

She flushed a little. "It is nice to be out," she said, and went on hurriedly, "We've been way up the stream to your timber lot, and Simon says there ought to be enough hay on the meadow up there to get you through next winter."

" 'Y Godfrey," Web ejaculated. He seemed as surprised as he was pleased, and looked at Simon and laughed. "That's just where we'll get it. But it sure beats me why I never thought of it and you did!" Then he grimaced and chuckled, "But man alive, it'll sure be a job gettin' it down from there."

Susan appeared at the woodshed door. "Why——" she exclaimed, and came out in the yard looking wonderingly at Simon and Debby.

The boys followed her, and Web said to them, "You boys go down and get the mail. Ye can finish the wood when ye get back."

They scampered off, looking back over their shoulders as if they also wondered what was going on.

Susan and Debby looked at each other, and finally Debby said, "We've been up the stream and Simon told me about Martha and I wanted to see her get fed."

Susan looked from her to Simon and back again, searchingly. A slow flush spread upward from Debby's throat. She laughed suddenly, a lilting laugh, but with a trace of disappointment in it. She caught Simon's arm and leaned against him.

"I didn't want to tell anybody today," she said, "but I guess we'll have to. We're going to be married—next week, with Margaret and Freem."

Susan's face cleared. "Oh, Debby!" she cried, and opened her arms.

Web didn't speak. He dropped his nested milk pails and caught Simon's hand in both of his and pumped it up and down and grinned. Simon was facing the road and, over the bank, he saw a familiar head and shoulders coming along by the Grahams'. His own grin stiffened.

Web glanced around and grunted. "Here comes Wash," he said.

Debby cried out faintly and looked about. "Can't we go in the barn? I—I don't want him to see me."

Susan gave her a quick look and ran with her to the barn. Simon and Web picked up the pails and followed them. Inside the barn, Debby took Simon's hand and pulled him back in the shadowy angle where Web kept his harnesses and ox yokes. Web pushed Susan ahead of him into the tie-up and set his pails down by the pump.

"It ain't likely he's comin' in here," he said.

Susan stepped out where she could see the dooryard. "But he is," she said. "You'd better come out here and talk to him."

Web grunted and pumped some water in a pail. Simon felt Debby shiver, and he put an arm about her. He saw Martha appear from nowhere and head for the tie-up. She stopped at Susan's feet and rubbed against her skirts.

Wash came striding up the dooryard. His shoulders were bent forward a little and his face had a pale, set look. He came directly to the barn and stopped just inside the door.

"Hello," Web said.

Wash glanced at him but didn't answer. His eyes fixed on Susan's pink dress, blinking. Then he said, "I'm lookin' for Debby."

"Debby?" Web said. "Why, she must be home. She ain't been well lately."

Wash said grimly, "I see her and Simon come downstream in the boat. They got out at the bend, and the oars is leanin' against the barn."

Simon heard Debby sigh and felt her straighten against him. Then she stepped out of the angle, Simon half a step behind her.

"Oh, Wash," she said, and her voice had a weepy note. "I'm so sorry. But I just couldn't help it. I like you so much—but I was so happy this afternoon that I couldn't—oh, I don't know how to tell you!"

Wash's eyes flicked from her to Simon and back again. "What ye—mean?" he said huskily.

Debby looked at him tearfully and then at Simon pleadingly.

Simon knew pretty well how Wash felt and was sorrier for him than he'd ever imagined he could be. He hated telling him, and made it as simple and quick as he could.

"We're getting married—next week," he said, and put his arm around Debby again.

Wash looked as if he'd been struck in the face. He seemed to sag all over. Then his eyes blazed and his hands opened and closed. He burst out thickly:

"I wish to God ye was my size!"

Nobody had noticed Martha stroll over to him, and now, as she rubbed against his leg, his foot shot out. It was more a shove than a kick, but Martha sailed in the air, struck the partition behind the grain bin and dropped out of sight between them.

"If ye got any spite t' work off," Web said hotly, "pick on some——"

Wash didn't wait for him to finish. He leaped and his fist streaked out and smacked against Web's cheek. Web staggered and another smash on his chest sent him down. He rolled to his feet, side-stepped a second charge and struck. Wash went sprawling on his hands and knees and bounced to his feet and charged again. He took one on the mouth that set him back on his heels, and came on more cautiously.

"I been waitin'—a long time for this," Web panted, and struck again.

"Mebby I ain't," Wash snapped back, and sent Web reeling.

They fought back and forth across the floor. Twice they went down together in a tangle of arms and legs, and got to their feet still punching each other. Finally their arms dropped from sheer exhaustion and Simon stepped between them.

"Looks like somebody's got to tell ye when to quit," he said. He grinned faintly. "I guess we'll have to call it a draw. But I got to tell ye, Wash, that I'm kind of glad, after seein' ye fight, that ye ain't as big as me."

Wash's eyes flickered between puffing lids. He looked from Simon to Debby and spit out some blood. He started to speak but, either from lack of breath or because he changed his mind, he didn't. His eyes flicked to Web and he turned abruptly and strode toward the road, swaying and with uneven steps, as if he were more than a little drunk.

"'Y Godfrey," Web said, and drew in a gasping breath. "I'm nearer to—likin' that—feller—than I ever was!"

"Eyah," Simon said.

"Well, I'm not!" Susan broke out. "He hadn't any reason to——" she touched Web's face gently. "It's all skinned and your eye's getting black."

Simon and Debby were still watching Wash, and Web chuckled deeply, "Don't ye go blamin' him. We've had that comin' for the last fifteen years." He chuckled again. "And I hope he's as satisfied as I am!"

"Come over to the pump," Susan said, "and let me wash your face."

Web followed her into the tie-up, and Simon gave Debby a little squeeze. Her eyes were still on the road, although Wash had disappeared, and they lifted to Simon full of pity.

"We'll have to be very nice to Wash," she whispered.

Simon nodded. "If he'll let us," he said, and looked toward the road, wondering again what it was that Wash had started to say. There had been something in Wash's eyes that reminded him of that day, ten years ago, when Wash had held the gun on him and told him to leave home. And the gun was loaded now, so Wash had said. Simon tucked in his chin and looked down at Debby and smiled.

A muffled clawing caught his ear and he turned to locate it. It seemed to come from behind the grain bins, and he suddenly remembered Martha. He went over to the nearer bin and looked down. It was too dark to see anything back there and he called to her. Her only response was more clawing. He tried to reach her but his arm was too large, and now Martha let out a squall.

"Wash hurt Martha?" Web called.

"I dunno," Simon said. "She's back of this grain bin and I can't get her out."

Web hurried from the tie-up, drying his face with his handkerchief. Simon got one of the heavy ox yokes from its pegs and shoved one end between the bin and the partition. Then he went to the other end of the bin and hooked his fingers on the back edge near the floor.

"Look out ye don't bust yourself," Web cautioned. "The's over half a ton of grain in that bin."

Simon braced his foot against the partition and slowly straightened. The bin moved with him, an inch, two inches, and Martha came out over the top. She gave a pleased *"younh"* as she struck the floor, and then sat down and began to wash herself.

"Well, I be dang," Web chuckled. "Ain't hurt a mite—she must of been wedged in back there."

Simon grinned. "It did look like kind of a tight fit."

"I hope nobody else gets caught like that," Susan said.

They all looked at her, and Web asked, "What ye mean?"

"Oh—Wash," she said. "He's always had an awful touchy streak in him. I just hope he gets over it before he does something."

Simon shook his head in annoyance. "Anybody'd feel mean, goin' through what he has," he said gruffly. Then he smiled. "How about keepin' Debby for supper?"

27

"Well," Web said after supper, "if you're getting married next week, ye got some steppin' round to do, seems as though."

Simon grinned, but when they got to talking about it, he realized there were a number of things to be done; and for the next two days the practical side of their coming marriage kept him and Debby too busy to think of much else. They rented the Dixon place at the turn, on the condition they could have it that week. Perley demurred at first; he wanted to stay and finish out his last year of driving the mail stage, but Judith persuaded him that a couple of weeks wouldn't make any difference.

"We're movin' t' Fairview the first of July, anyhow," she said, "and we can move out just as easy now, and leave Debby and Simon have the place."

With Simon's help, Debby took measurements of the rooms for new furnishings and decided what she wanted, and they spent the next day in Fairview with Margaret and Freem, "buyin' out the town," as Freem put it.

They borrowed Aussy's pair of light driving horses for the trip and hooked them up to Web's two-seated wagon. Simon's head was so full of household things that the sight of smoke over Parlin Pond way didn't, at first, rouse more than his casual interest. They were on their way home, between Jessup's Mills and Crockett hill, in the late afternoon when he noticed the smoke. It showed only hazily over the hill and seemed far away. But when they topped the hill and the valley lay before them, a shock

of dismay tightened Simon's fingers on the reins and made him check the horses.

The smoke was east of Parlin Pond, scarcely seven miles away. He could see the metallic glitter of the pond, and across those miles of black growth and hardwood the smoke looked like a dirty gray cloud. It rose in lazy billows and floated off to the southeast.

"Why," Debby cried, "it must be right near your lot, Simon!"

He nodded and smiled grimly. "What's left of our lot," he said.

"You—you mean it's burned—already?"

Simon nodded again. "Must of started just this side the pond, and worked downstream."

"Oh, what a shame!" Debby wailed. Then she gave Simon a startled look. "I wonder if—somebody set it?"

"Nobuddy's settin' fires on purpose," Freem said.

"No," Simon agreed. "Like enough it was somebody fishin' at the pond, and got careless." He studied the smoke. "Looks like it would take some stoppin', if the little bog's dry, and I guess we better get along up there."

He spoke to the horses and they took the long slope at a trot. At the foot of the hill he gave them their heads and they outdistanced the dust that had run along with them.

"You reckon we better go up in the wagon or take the boat?" Freem asked, as they drove into the village.

"We'll make better time with the hosses," Simon said. "We can leave 'em on the pond road the other side the fire."

He swung the horses into Web's dooryard. "You girls can walk home from here," he said. "Hold the hosses," he gave the reins to Debby, "while we get some shovels and axes."

Susan came out, and said quickly, "Web took all the shovels and axes. He went up in the boat this morning with Ezra and the Benton boys, and the rest of the men drove—I don't know how many wagons went up there." She shaded her eyes and looked upstream. "I guess they're getting it stopped—the smoke isn't near so bad as it was."

Simon took the reins again and Debby and Margaret got out.

"Aren't you going to change your clothes?" Margaret said. It was the first time she had spoken since they had sighted the fire. Simon glanced at her and thought she looked pale.

"Ain't time," Freem said.

"Well, you be careful," she told him.

"And you be careful, too," Debby said to Simon.

Simon gave her a half-smile and drove out of the dooryard. There wasn't a man in sight as they went through the village and crossed the bridge. He walked the horses up the hill and then urged them to a fast trot along the ridge. They kept ahead of the dust but the smoke hung all about them, acrid and dirty gray. There wasn't enough breeze to move it. The horses didn't like it, but the farther they went, the thinner it got and it had practically disappeared when they came to the end of the ridge. The ridge dipped there to join the wider upper valley, and just beyond the dip was the road to Parlin Pond.

A little way in on the pond road they saw the wagons from Council Rock and Ricker's Falls. They were drawn out to the side of the road, the horses all facing away from the pond, ready for a quick getaway in case of a change of wind. There were women in most of the wagons, wives and daughters who had come along to keep the horses quiet. Nellie Gregg and Mercy Graham were sitting in Nathan's wagon. Simon pulled up alongside them.

"I guess it's about over," Nellie said. "We was right at the edge of the smoke when we first come, and now we can't even smell it."

"Any the boys been out lately?" Simon asked.

"Ain't seen a soul since they went in, and that's around nine o'clock. But I cal'late they'll be showin' up before long. But we did have right smart of comp'ny this morning—I don't know how many moose and deer and foxes an' rabbits run by us. They give us quite a time with the hosses."

"I bet they did," Simon said. He backed the wagon and turned it around.

Freem jumped out and tied the horses to a sapling. "I guess they're too tired t' cut up any," he said, and followed Simon into the woods.

It was two miles and a half to the stream from where they left the wagon, but they made it in close to thirty minutes. Simon led the way at a bent-kneed running walk. He cut straight through tall stands of black-growth, circled alder-choked guzzle holes and cedar swamps, plowed through thickets of fir. They came out at the lower edge of the little bog. In the angle between it and the stream, smoking snags lifted charred boles from the fire-blackened tangle for a mile or more upstream. Points of flame still curled and darted, and here and there a grotesque lop-armed silhouette marked what had once been a stalwart hemlock or pine.

Men with axes and shovels and hoes patrolled the edge of the bog, and across the stream other men stood guard at wider intervals. Simon and Freem kept back from the tangle, looking for Web. They passed behind Roger Benton and his sons, and Nathan Gregg and Otis and Lester Wick. Other men were dim in the reek beyond. They went on and located Web by the stream. The heat-dried grass crackled and broke under their feet as they crossed a small guzzle behind Web. He turned with a start and grinned with relief when he saw Simon and Freem.

"Godfrey," he exclaimed. "Sounded just like the grass had caught again." He took off his hat and drew his sleeve across his smoke-grimed face. "Kind of hot doin's a while back, but it's about done, now."

"You look about done, too," Simon said. He gave Web a half-smile. "Well, we won't have to come way up here hayin', anyhow."

Web shook his head and the set of his mouth made him look like a smoke-blackened gargoyle. "Our lot ain't nothin' but ashes an' charcoal," he said. "I never see a fire run s' fast. It come downstream just a-jumpin'—smoke full of red streaks, rollin' and poppin', the tops goin' off like firecrackers. The' was some nice stuff went up, and ours was about the best of it."

"See anything of Wash or Parker?" Simon asked.

Web's eyes narrowed and slanted up at Simon. "Wash is here, but he never showed up till around noon—and Parker never come at all."

"That's funny," Freem said. "You'd of thought they'd been

the first up here, what with all that timber of theirs just below."

"It's *dam'* funny," Web said. "But if Wash done it, it's the first time I ever knowed of him takin' out his spite behind anybody's back."

Simon nodded. "It don't sound like Wash. It sounds more like Parker; only he wouldn't have any call to do it, and he's too lazy to take a step when he don't have to." Simon shook his head. "I guess it was just an accident."

"Well," Web said, "we're out a good half-million feet of lumber and around twenty-five tons of hay. I'd like t' know where in Jericho we're goin' t' get some more hay."

Nobody spoke for several moments. Then Simon said to Web, "You better get along home. It's close to chore time now and most of the others can go with ye. Fires don't burn so much at night, and Freem and me and a couple more can look after it till morning."

"If we'd just get some rain now," Freem said. He looked over the cloudless sky and grinned. "But I cal'late it won't rain till we start hayin'."

"Ain't that a fact," Web said.

Four men volunteered to stay all night and watch with Freem and Simon: Ezra Graham and Lester Wick and two from Ricker's Falls. By sundown Simon wished that more had stayed, as the wind began to pick up. It was something he hadn't looked for; and still more unlooked-for were the clouds that began to roll up against the wind. They blotted out the moon and, in the darkness, a thousand candles lighted up; flickering tongues of flame, festoons and mounds of glowing embers, and every now and then the thump of a falling tree and a crackling shower of sparks.

The breeze kept the men busy going from point to point, but it helped drive away the mosquitoes. Thunder began to rumble and Simon felt a spatter of rain. The rain increased and sent up hissing clouds of steam from the embers. It came down steadily for half an hour and Simon walked out through the burn. The fire was out, except in places where it had followed old roots deep underground, and Simon knew it was safe to leave.

The two men from Ricker's Falls shouldered their shovels and

set off through the woods for the road where their wagon stood.

"Follow the edge of the little bog," Simon told them. "And then take that long guzzle. It's longer but it'll bring ye right to the road and keep ye from gettin' turned around in the woods."

"We'll make it all right," they told him.

He and Freem and Ezra and Lester got in the boat and went downstream in the rain. It was a wet trip and they were all hungry. The house was dark and quiet when Simon got home and he took off his shoes and rummaged in the pantry. He ate all of a wild strawberry pie and cleaned up a plate of doughnuts, washing them down with a pitcher of milk.

When he went to bed he tried to wipe the fire from his mind. It was an accident, he told himself, nothing but an accident; but after he fell asleep he dreamed of seeing Wash's face sneering at him from a ring of red coals.

28

WITH Debby in his arms Simon had found it singularly easy to give her precedence over the woods. He could have promised her with equal ease anything she might have asked him. And the next two days his head was in the clouds.

The fire turned his mind to the woods again and brought him back to earth. He found himself face to face with the fact that the woods were an indivisible part of him; that if he had to give them up, something vital in him would die.

What he had told Debby that afternoon simply wasn't true. It came to him with sudden shocking clearness; just as if he'd awakened from an enchanting dream by being plunged into icy water. It crowded from his mind the insidious suspicion that Wash was responsible for the fire, and he lay in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering how he could make Debby understand.

Debby. Little Debby. He could still feel her in his arms and he knew if he lost her, something equally vital in him would die.

It was like being pulled, irresistibly, in opposite directions, and it brought the cold sweat out on him. There didn't seem to be any answer.

Faint padding sounds broke the early morning stillness. Simon was scarcely aware of them until the handle of his door squeaked. He turned his head and saw the door slowly open, and in the crack he saw an eye, and then another, and Wallace's face took shape. Then Wallace whispered, "He's awake!" and burst into the room with Ting at his heels. "You goin' to lie in bed all day?" he laughed. "Come on, get up!"

"And you better hurry, too," Ting piped. "Breakfast'll be ready time you're dressed."

Simon's annoyance gave way to relief in having something else to turn to for at least a little while. He swung his feet out of bed and gave the boys a one-sided grin. "Looks like ye got something on your minds," he said.

"Why—uh—" Wallace squirmed diffidently and edged up to Simon—"uh—don't ye—uh-h—don't ye reckon this would be a nice day to—to go boat ridin'?"

"Boat ridin'?" Simon reached for a sock and looked at his nephews quizzically. "Why, I thought the time to go boat ridin' was on a rainy day."

"Oh, no-o," they exclaimed together. Then Wallace snickered and jabbed Ting with his elbow. "He's just foolin'," he said. "Come on, Uncle Simon," he wheedled, "take us boat ridin', won't ye?"

"You better ask your pa about it."

Wallace grinned stiffly and gulped. He glanced at Ting, and Ting wriggled uncomfortably and looked down, very much interested in making his big toes stand up at right angles. Simon grinned to himself and reached for his other sock.

"Well?" he prompted.

Wallace shook his head. Then he sighed. "I wisht he'd licked us the other day. It wouldn't of taken near so long to get over."

"As what?" Simon asked.

"Huh?"

"What takes longer to get over?"

"Oh—thinkin' about things—like papa told us in the mill yard."

Simon stepped into his pants. "Still thinkin' about that, are ye?"

"Well, Papa kind of reminded us about it when we was doin' the chores this morning." Wallace's face screwed up. "He never does forget anything, seems as though."

"Mebby he wouldn't have to if ye remembered what he told ye. Ever think of that?"

Wallace gave Simon an incredulous look. "Why—" he

gulped—"if we did that, we wouldn't ever have any fun at all!"

"I dunno about that. Which do ye reckon would be the most fun—playin' around the mill when ye was told to stay away, or takin' a boat ride?"

"Doin' the both of 'em!" Ting burst out. He made a wriggling caper and his grin showed the gaps in his teeth.

Simon grunted. "Figure ye can eat your cake an' have it, too, do ye?"

"Sure!" Ting capered again and put his hands to his stomach. "In here."

"Eyah, but what ye goin' to do when ye get hungry for another piece?"

"Go to the cake box!"

"And what if it made ye sick?"

Ting sucked his upper lip into the gap between his teeth. Then he grinned at Simon slyly. "Ain't ever been sick yet."

"That ain't any reason ye won't be," Simon said. "It's just the other way round—the more ye don't pay 'tention to your ma and pa, the more likely ye are to get into a mess."

Wallace sighed. "It don't look like we'd get our boat ride." He pressed his lips together, and said to Ting, "That's what ye get for bein' so flip."

"Well, if you hadn't told Papa about us going into the mill," Ting retorted, "we wouldn't be in this mess."

"No," Simon said. "What got ye into it was playin' in the mill. Your pa told ye to stay out of there, and ye didn't mind him. That's what got ye into the mess. And it might of got ye into a whole lot worse one. Like Jotham when he went through the tann'ry floor and hung there for two hours with a busted leg before anybody heard him. That's what ye got to look out for. Ye got to watch out where ye put your feet and not go pokin' into things till somebody's showed ye how to go about it. Come on downstairs now and eat your breakfasts."

Even as he said it, it struck Simon how well it applied to himself. He'd got himself into a mess by speaking before he thought. And now his thinking about it was going to be worse than a licking. He might as well, he told himself, have it out with Debby before he got in any deeper.

After breakfast, Simon headed across the tannery dam for the Grants'. Going up the lane, he heard a vaguely familiar voice shout:

"Git out, an' stay out!"

It came from the direction of his old home, and there, in the dooryard, he saw two men. One was Freem; the other faced him with something that looked like a gun. Simon's eyes narrowed. He couldn't believe the other man was Parker. He hadn't seen his disgusting half brother for he couldn't think how long, and it seemed incredible that Parker could have the courage to talk to anybody that way, even when he held a gun. But it couldn't be anyone else.

Simon jumped the lane fence and hurried across the field. Parker continued to shout threats and, as Simon came to the road, pointed the gun at Freem. Freem didn't move, and Simon called out:

"You, Parker! Put that gun down!"

Parker jerked with surprise and swung the gun toward Simon. Freem was scarcely ten feet from Parker and he closed the gap in one lunge. His big hands caught the gun and turned the muzzle skyward. It went off, both barrels almost simultaneously, and the jar of its kick and Freem's twisting grasp snatched it away from Parker.

Simon came running into the dooryard. Parker gave him a panic-stricken look and ran for the back entry. Freem dropped the gun and caught him. Parker struggled, clawing like a cornered animal. He broke away and started for the back entry again, but Simon was close enough then to reach him. His hand fastened on Parker's arm and gave it a twitch that sent Parker sliding and rolling across the grass to the driveway. He lay there cowering, his face a sort of yellowish gray, his eyes full of fear as he looked up at Simon.

Freem had run into the house, and Simon heard him calling Margaret. After a little they came out. Margaret was pale and shaken.

"He had her locked in the stair closet," Freem said. "And she thought he'd shot me when the gun went off."

Margaret said brokenly to Simon, "Thank God—you got

here—in time. They've—oh, I can't stay here any longer, Freem. Take me home with you."

"What's the trouble?" Simon asked.

"Oh, they—they've been acting like—I don't know what, ever since the day after you came home. Wash has been going around like a crazy man; he hasn't said a word to me or Parker since he and Web had that fight. And Parker's been trying to keep me away from Freem—he said I'd never take care of somebody else's house till Wash married somebody to take my place here. And this morning——" Margaret hid her face a moment on Freem's chest. Then she turned to the house. "Come in with me while I get my things."

Simon glanced down and the look in his eyes made Parker shrink.

"Where's Wash?" Simon asked.

Parker didn't answer. He seemed incapable of speech. Simon nudged him with his toe, and was surprised. Parker looked fat, like a well-larded woodchuck, but his body felt hard to the touch. Simon's lips twitched grimly; Wash must have worked the lard into muscle, he thought. But where was Wash?

"Where's Wash?" he repeated, and nudged Parker a little harder.

Parker shook his head. Simon reached down for him suddenly, and he squealed. "He ain't here! He went to Fairview yeste'day—to get his nose fixed, and he ain't been home since!"

"And ye thought ye'd run things while he was gone?"

Parker didn't answer, and Simon said, "You ain't runnin' anything. And if I ketch ye ever tryin' it again, I'll turn ye wrong side out—just like I'd skin a horn pout."

Parker's face was suddenly damper, yet he ran his tongue across his lips.

Simon turned away in disgust. He picked up the gun, snapped it across his knee, went over to the stone hitching post and wrapped the twin barrels around it. Then he went to the back entry and called:

"You be ready soon?"

"We're coming now," Margaret answered.

A few minutes later they came out. Margaret had some

dresses over her arm and Freem carried a bundle done up in a sheet. Simon looked around for Parker and saw him in the barn door with a pitchfork in his hands. Simon grunted and led the way through the lilac hedge and across the field to the Grants'. He was wondering now if he dared to leave Debby in the Dixon house alone all winter. Then it came to him that he didn't need to leave her—he could take her into the woods with him—and if she went in, Brink's wife would likely go in, too!

He felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him. There was no question about Debby going; she loved the woods.

It was some time before he could get Debby off alone. He had to wait till she'd heard what had happened and had helped Sarah fix up a room for Margaret. And as they talked, he verified what Parker had told him about Wash. It amused him to think that one of Web's fists had connected hard enough with Wash's nose to break it; yet he hoped the doctor in Fairview could set it straight. Girls wouldn't like a lop-sided nose, when it was as long as Wash's, and he wanted to see Wash find a nice girl some day and get married. The sooner the better; it didn't do men any good to have to get their meals and take care of a house on top of a full day's work. It was a mischief breeder, and Simon didn't want any mischief from Wash and Parker.

Freem went up the hill to work on his house and Simon sat on the well cover and waited for Debby. When she came out, he said:

"Let's go up the hill. I want to ketch Henry before he starts off with Perley, and we got some business with him."

"Business?" Debby looked puzzled.

Simon grinned. "You forgot he's the town clerk?"

"Oh!" Debby said, and flushed. "You mean—" her voice dropped almost to a whisper—"our marriage license?"

"That's what!" Simon exclaimed, almost as softly. He put his arm under hers and they walked lightly down the driveway.

When they reached the road, he said, "I been thinkin', Debby. How'd ye like to come into the woods with me this winter?"

"Why——?" Debby caught her breath. "You—you really mean that?"

"I dunno of anything I'd like better," he told her. "If ye

think ye could stand it. But I kind of think that Helen—that's Brink's wife—would go in if you did, and that would give ye both some comp'ny."

"Oh, I'd——" Debby stopped short and looked down. There was a difference in her voice when she went on. "I—I thought you said you could stay out of the woods, and I——" she stopped again. Then, "Didn't you mean that?"

Simon's insides seemed to tighten up. Since the idea had come to him he'd been so sure she would jump at the chance to go into the woods that now he didn't know what to say. He looked down at her but she didn't look up.

"Eyah," he blurted, "I did mean it—I could do about anything ye asked me to, if it—if it was the thing to do. But stayin' out of the woods—well, it didn't come to me till afterward that Brink's countin' on me to help him finish out our lay. It's my job, and workin' in the woods is the only job I know. I'm doin' too well at it just to quit an' set around."

"You know—farming," Debby said, and her voice sounded even queerer.

Simon gave her a dazed, unbelieving look. He couldn't speak.

Suddenly Debby gave his arm a squeeze, and laughed up at him, "Oh, I can't do it. I—you made me think for so long that you didn't care what I did, that I—I just wanted to pay you back a little. But I can't." She squeezed his arm again and made a tender sound in the back of her throat. "Oh, Simon—I wouldn't keep you away from the woods for anything—I'm not even going to spoil them by going in with you!"

Simon swallowed and took a deep breath. He shook his head. "You wouldn't spoil them. I want ye to come with me."

"No. Well—maybe in a year or two, but this winter I'm going to teach again. My term runs for two more years."

"But ye don't have to teach—you can tell 'em you're quittin'. I want ye to come into the woods with me."

"What's Mr. Archer's wife like?" Debby asked.

"Oh, Helen's nice. She's—well, she's like Ida, only not so big."

"I mean, do you think she'd go into the woods? Would she

like to walk around and watch the men at work and everything that was going on?"

Simon didn't know, and admitted it. "But I'll write Brink and find out."

"All right," Debby told him. "If she likes the woods and we can be company for each other, I'll go in with you. But I'm not going unless she does. You'd be wondering all day what I was doing with myself, and it would plague us both. And that might lead to something worse."

Simon didn't argue about it. Debby would be on his mind if she didn't have a congenial companion to spend the days with; and he'd had her on his mind enough to know that it interfered with his work as well as his peace of mind.

"I'll write Brink today," he said. He grinned suddenly. "I ain't told him yet about our gettin' married and I hope he can come and bring Helen."

"That would be nice," Debby said. "I've heard so much about Mr. Archer."

"Call him Brink," Simon said. "Brink and Helen."

Debby laughed. "All right. Anyhow I'd like to see them both."

"You will!" Simon grinned. "When Brink gets my letter I can just see him rise up and holler!"

Debby pressed his arm against her. They had come to the turn and her eyes went from Simon to the small Dixon house and barn.

"Just think," she said softly. "By this time next week, we'll be living there; just you and me."

Simon smiled down at her. "Be kind of nice, won't it?"

Debby nodded and made again that tender little sound in the back of her throat.

The stage, with its long body and two wide seats and the high dashboard with its rows of letter boxes, stood by the back entry. There were boxes and bundles in the wagon body and now Perley came out with another. He set it in the wagon and waved.

"Gittin' a good start on movin'," he called. "We'll be all out o' here by day after t'morry."

"Ye better be," Simon laughed. "Ezry's bringin' our stuff out from Fairview day after tomorra."

"Don't ye worry," Perley laughed back. "He's takin' the last of our stuff in with him when he goes t' bring yours out."

Debby and Simon walked on up the hill. They approached Freem's new house, and Simon remarked:

"Looks like it was all finished."

"It is on the outside," Debby told him. "He said this morning he just had some doors to fit and some shelves to put in and he'd be all done."

"This is the first time I've had a good look at it," Simon said. "We'll have to go over and see the inside when we get through at Henry's."

They turned in at the Locke place. Henry's wife told them he was out in the garden, and Debby stayed to talk with her while Simon went out back. Henry was hilling potatoes with a long-handled hoe. He had a strap with a ring in it fastened to the stump of his left arm, and the end of the handle slid back and forth in the ring as he worked. Simon walked softly up behind him and let the end of the handle bunt against his hand. Henry glanced at the ring, moved the handle experimentally and returned to his hoeing. Simon put out his hand again, and again Henry looked at the ring. They did this several times and then Simon caught and held the handle. Henry jerked at it, muttering, and turned.

"Dog-gone ye!" he laughed. "So that's what's been plaguin' me all this time! And I thought it was the cussed handle jammin' in the ring. Here, take it. He shoved the hoe at Simon. "Ye used t' be a heller with a hoe."

Simon backed away, grinning. "No, ye don't. I got enough to tend to this morning, and I got a little job for you."

"Eyah?" Henry's eyes twinkled expectantly.

"You know well enough what I'm here for," Simon told him.

"Mebby," Henry teased. "But ye got t' ask for it."

"All right then, I'm askin' for it. I want ye to fix it up so Debby and me can get married."

Henry's fist swung lightly against Simon's hard stomach. "I'd heard it, but I wanted t' hear it from you. That's fine, boy! Just fine!" he said, and shook hands vigorously with Simon.

"Freem been over to see ye yet?" Simon asked.

"No, he ain't," Henry chuckled. "And I been lookin' for him, too."

They walked back to the house, where Henry congratulated Debby and then wrote out their license with a flourish. "I'll make out the notice right off," he said, "and put it up at the store when I go for the mail."

"Better make out one for Freem, too," Simon said. "We're goin' over there and we'll send him right over."

They found Freem in the kitchen. He grinned at them and waved a hammer. "Be all done when I finish these shelves," he said. "Come and see the house."

There were four good-sized rooms and a large back entry downstairs and five rooms, two of them unfinished, upstairs.

"Oh, I like it," Debby said. "But it's so big."

Simon nodded and grinned at Freem. "Eyah, you'll have to start raisin' a family right off to help fill it up."

Freem got red, and stammered, grinning, "Th-that's what we was figurin'."

Simon roared. "Well, Debby, we can't let them get ahead of us, can we?"

Debby's flush deepened. Her eyes wavered and then came back to Simon's. "I'd like just as many as you want," she told him softly.

His arm went about her shoulders as gently as if she were something very fragile. Then he turned to Freem.

"We just come from Henry's," he said, "and if you want to get your marriage notice up with ours, ye better get over there right off."

Freem glanced at his watch. "I guess I better, if I ketch him."

They left the house together, Freem hurrying across to Henry's, and Debby and Simon going back down the hill.

"Talkin' about a family," Simon remarked, "the Dixon place ain't much more than big enough for you and me."

Debby slanted a smile up at him. "But it'll do for now," she said.

"Eyah," Simon smiled back at her. "For now."

At the turn, the old tavern foundations caught Simon's eyes again. They gave him an idea. He said nothing about it, but

when he left Debby at home he came back and looked over the foundations carefully. The great granite slabs were still snugly together and there were only a few cracks in the double wall of bricks that carried the cellar windows and the sills. Simon's interest quickened. He stepped off the distances along the foundations and walked back up the hill with rising excitement as more possibilities came to him.

He could build a house there that would put even Brink's to shame, and he'd fill it with the same kind of things! A big piano, made of rosewood, for Debby to play on; great deep chairs of Spanish leather; a bed with those newfangled springs, built to order for Debby and himself, and long enough for him to lie out straight in; art squares, so thick and soft you couldn't hear yourself walking, and all those fluffy things that Debby liked; and out in the barn a pair of fast horses and one of those new driving wagons with a top that would go up or down. Elbow room, and a place to raise a family in!

29

FREEM had returned from Henry's and was working again on his cupboard shelves when Simon got there.

"Say," Simon said to him, "did ye take the land along with the tavern?"

"Why—kind of," Freem said. "Ormond wouldn't sell the buildings without he sold the land, so Web come in with me and he took the land."

Simon snorted in sudden amusement.

Freem smiled uncertainly but didn't voice the question in his eyes.

"I was just thinkin'," Simon said, "that I'd have some fun buyin' that land off Web." He kept to himself the reason for his amusement.

Freem grinned and then looked puzzled. "But what ye want it for?"

"I had an idea I might put up a house there—but don't tell anybody—I don't want Debby to hear about it till I tell her myself."

Freem shook his head. "I won't tell anybuddy. But, Godfrey, a house——"

Simon laughed and flipped a hand. "Tell ye about it later."

On his way downhill he looked over the foundations again, and went on home to do some figuring and drawing. He had finished some rough plans of the house when Web came home from the factory.

"What ye got there?" Web asked.

"I hear ye kind of got caught last fall," Simon countered.

"Caught?" Web's eyebrows went up.

"Eyah—the tavern prope'ty."

Web's eyebrows came together. "Freem tell ye I got caught?"

"Godfrey, no!" Simon laughed. "He ain't any more idea than a woodchuck why ye did it. But it come to me why, when he told me ye'd bought it together."

Web grimaced. "I did kind of run a blaze on myself. But what could I do? I'd got him all worked up over buildin' a house and he didn't have the money t' buy new lumber."

"How much ye got into it?" Simon chuckled.

"A hundred dollars."

"I'll give ye a hundred an' fifty for it—cash."

"You won't give me nothing for it. Ye ain't any use for it, and——"

"Oh, yes, I have," Simon said. "I'm building me a house there."

Web stared at him. "A house? Why, for God's sake, a house on them——"

"A house on them foundations," Simon interrupted, "is just the size I want. It'll give me some elbow room and a place big enough to raise a family."

Web shook his head incredulously. "Ye got any idea of the size of them foundations?"

"I ain't measured 'em but I——"

"Well, I have. I and Freem measured 'em, and the main foundation's fifty foot front and thutty foot deep, and the ell's thutty-six by twenty."

Simon grinned. "Just about what I figured. It'll seem kind of nice to have all the room ye want."

"Good Godfrey," Web ejaculated. "This marryin' business has turned ye crazy. But I'll fix ye—I won't sell it to ye!"

"Oh, yes, ye will." Simon caught Web by the neck and slack of his pants and started for the kitchen with him. "Just how far would ye like to walk like this?" he inquired.

Web's toes barely touched the floor, and he cried, "Hey, look out for them pants! Leave go, dang ye, and I'll make ye a present of the dam' land."

"That's more like it," Simon chuckled. "But I'm payin' ye a hundred an' fifty for it. No, you wait," he said, as Web started

to protest. "You paid me a hundred an' fifty for the hundred I put into this house, and I'm doin' the same thing on mine."

"Well," Web growled, "all right. If ye want it that way."

The days fairly pushed each other along. Simon had never felt busier. Debby's delight over the new house was as keen as his own. She seemed even more excited than he was over its spacious possibilities. They made sketches of different layouts and she pored over them with flushed cheeks and glowing eyes, chewing her pencil, asking him what he thought of this and that.

They finally decided on the plans. There would be a great room, thirty by twenty, taking in the southwest corner of the main building. It would have a five-foot fireplace at the back and a flue for a heating stove at the front. It would have the big soft leather chairs, the soft art squares and the rosewood piano that Simon wanted; and it would have the curtains and pictures and things that Debby wanted. It wasn't to be a parlor, open only on occasions; it was to be a place to live in, where they could enjoy themselves and their friends.

A central hall would run through the house from the front to the ell at the back. It would carry the stairway to four big bedrooms and the attic over the ell. Across the hall on the first floor would be two more bedrooms; the front room for Debby and Simon, and the back room for the newest of what Simon referred to as their "permanent boarders," the mention of whom made Debby blush and turned Simon a little pink himself.

The ell would contain the kitchen and a real dining room, and there would be a porch running the length of it, looking off upstream. Simon couldn't remember the old barn. It had been taken down years ago by old Morrill Dow to build sheds at the tannery. It had had no cellar and the foundation stones could be moved at will, and Simon planned on a small barn, just large enough for a pair of driving horses and their feed, a buggy and a driving wagon.

The low-eaved house would have four wide dormer windows along the front and as many more at the back, and four brick chimneys, two with double flues, would rise massively above the roof. The sills and some of the longer timbers, as well as the bricks and flooring, would have to be hauled from Fairview.

Simon attended to these things when he and Debby drove in with Web and Susan to get the deed fixed up and buy some things they'd forgotten for the Dixon place.

When Ezra arrived with their household goods, Simon looked over the loaded wagon and was sure there wasn't room in the house for it all. They unloaded it in the late afternoon and under Debby's directions put each thing where it belonged. Simon was amazed. The four small rooms actually seemed to expand. He spread a nine-by-twelve art square on the sitting-room floor and straightened, grinning sheepishly. There was plenty of room. He looked about and was struck by the coziness of it. It had a chummy sort of atmosphere that pleased him.

He spoke of these things to Debby and she laughed contentedly.

"I'm glad you like it," she said.

He grinned. "Well, anyhow, it'll do till we start gettin' some of them 'permanent boarders.' "

Two days later when the curtains were up and the pictures hung and the tables and bureaus and beds had fluffy covers, Simon thought he had never seen a place that looked so homey—not even Brink's; and all that kept him from spending a large part of his time there was the preliminary work on the new house.

Simon had given the job of building the house to Otis and Lester Wick. They were carpenters and millwrights as well as loggers and mill operators, and with help on the timbers, and with Marvin and Freem to lay the chimneys and build the fireplace, they promised to have the roof on before the first snow.

Simon had hoped to see it that far along before he left for the woods, but Otis shook his head.

"It's too much house," Otis said, "for that. And besides, we got our hayin' t' do."

Simon had forgotten about haying. It brought up the question of Web's extra hay, and he spoke to him at dinnertime about it.

"I been tryin' t' dicker with Levi," Web said. "He's got a meadow across from Spring Brook that he ain't cut for the last two years. The' was a lot of rotten-butted fir and brown ash along the road to it, and it's been blowin' down and just falling

over till the road's a mess. He'll never clean it up and he's too dang stubborn t' raft the hay down like I told him I'd do. But try t' buy the hay off him——" Web shook his head and grunted.

"How much'll it cut?" Simon asked.

"More'n enough. Levi was cuttin' around thutty-five tons before the road got plugged."

"How about me havin' a try at him?" Simon suggested.

Web grunted again. "Go ahead. But don't ye offer him more'n fifty dollars for it—it wouldn't be worth that if we didn't need it so bad."

"I'll go up an' take a look at it," Simon said.

"No need for that," Web told him. "The trouble is gettin' the critter t' sell."

"Well, I kind of feel like stretchin' my legs," Simon said, and after dinner he struck off upstream.

He crossed the brook and skirted the meadows. It took him forty minutes to reach Levi's upper meadow, opposite Spring Brook. It was a deep meadow, running well back from the stream, and it looked as if it hadn't been cut for more than two years. Here and there, all over its fifty-odd acres, bushes and alder sprouts stood above the hay. It was worse that way, Simon thought, than his and Web's meadow had been before it burned. It would be a job to cut it, let alone get the hay down; but the hay was there.

Simon went on back to the hay road and found it pretty bad, but not too bad. About a week's work with somebody to help him and he could clean up the mess. He followed the hay road to where it came out on the Valley road and took it back to the village, turning at the church toward Crockett Hill and Levi's.

It was a five-minute walk from the church to the Scott place, and Simon saw Levi at work on a harness as he came into the dooryard. Levi sat in the wide barn doorway, measuring and punching holes for rivets. He looked up and waved his awl at Simon, his eyes bright with speculation.

"W-w-well," he said cordially, "wh—huh—whut ye doin' w-w-way up here?"

"Just finishin' up a walk," Simon told him. "Felt like stretchin' my legs while I was waitin' for Ezry."

Levi nodded. "I s-see him go by wh—huh—with them sills

last evenin'. What y-ye aimin' t' b-build?—A hu—huh—hotel?"

"Eyah," Simon grinned. "Kind of a family hotel—just for Debby and me."

Levi snorted. "G-got your s-sights raised kind of hu-high, ain't ye?"

"No tellin'. We're just gettin' ready for what might happen."

Levi cackled. Simon laughed with him, and then said:

"I just come by that upper meadow of yours. What ye aimin' to do with it—let it grow up to alders?"

"N-n-no, 'y Godfrey—th-them m-m-meadows never do g-grow up that way!"

"Ye been up there this spring?"

Levi shook his head. "N-n-no need to."

"Ye better go up an' take a look, then. The's bushes and alder sprouts all over it—and the road would make a bobcat do some scramblin' to get through it."

Levi blinked. "Eyah," he admitted, "the r-road is k-kind of bad, bu-but it'll r-rot out, g-g-give it time."

"Time them brown ash rot out, ye won't have any meadow—it'll be an alder swamp. I just thought I'd let ye know," Simon said, and turned away.

"Hey!" Levi sounded startled. "D-d-don't hurry off."

Simon half turned. "I got to be gettin' along."

"Bu-bu-bu——" Levi sputtered. "D-dang-it! Ain't y-ye g-g-got a proposition?"

"About what?"

Levi gave him an outraged look. "Y-y-ye know dam' well what I m-m-mean!"

Simon looked blank, and Levi sputtered, "The hay! W-w-web wants it. Hu—huh—he offered me fi-fifty d-d-dollars for it!"

"He did?" Simon looked amazed. "I wouldn't give ye a nickel for it."

Levi's chin whisker seemed to curl up; then it sagged. "Y-y-ye w-w-wouldn't?"

"Cost more to get it than it's worth," Simon declared. "But if Web needs it, I'll tell ye what I'll do—I'll clean up the road and the meadow for all the hay we can cut off it this year and next."

"T-t-two year's hay," Levi yelped, "f-f-for nothin'?"

Simon grinned. "I guess you better clean it up yourself then."

Levi blinked a moment. Then he said, "I-i-it's your hay!"

"For this year and next?"

Levi nodded. "I-i-if ye clean it up good."

"We will," Simon said. "I don't figure to raft that hay."

"D-dang ye," Levi cried. Then he laughed. "G-g-git out o' here n-now, afore I l-l-lose my t-temper."

Simon walked out to the road and looked up the slope of Crockett Hill. It was time for Ezra with his second load of timbers, and he was on time. His big horses were plodding along just this side of Charles Norton's, less than half a mile away. Simon started for the village and his new house.

The sills and half of the first-floor studding were in place, but Otis and his helpers were making what seemed to Simon slow work on the overhead beams.

"What ye foolin' with that spli'shore for?" he asked.

Otis looked at him with a sort of resigned indignation. "Mebby ye'll tell me," he retorted, "how in hell we're a-goin' t' git them beams up without a spli'shore when you ain't around?"

His expression and his tone, as well as what he said, struck Simon's funny spot and he laughed and sat down on a beam and kept on laughing till Otis and Lester and the Benton boys were laughing with him. By the time they had the three beams in place and got Ezra's wagon unloaded, it was nearly six o'clock and they knocked off work for the day.

The afternoon before the wedding, Simon had a letter from Ed Topham. Brink and Helen, Ed wrote, had gone to the shore and couldn't be reached, and he himself was so plagued with rheumatism that he hadn't the courage to make the trip. Simon was disappointed. He had counted on their being there, and he had hoped for word that Helen would spend the winter in the woods. While there was no particular hurry about hearing what Helen would do, Simon wanted her to meet Debby, and he'd wanted Brink to stand up with him.

He forgot his disappointment at suppertime. Aussy and Ida, and Sarah and Margaret and Marvin and Freem, as well as

Debby, were there. It was a gay party, except for occasional dampness in Sarah's eyes and Marvin's wistful glances at Debby. Aussy set the pace as they sat down to supper. He looked at Debby and Margaret and shook his head with long-faced solemnity.

"It don't seem right," he rumbled deeply, "t' see such trim fillies get hooked up for life with a couple o' moose."

Ida's plump shoulders shook. "Well," she cried, "it worked out all right for us, if 'twas the other way around."

"Eyah? That's what you say," Aussy said dryly, accenting the pronoun. "But look at me—all wore down t' nothin' at all. It's the little pardner that ketches hell. Eyah, you girls'll have to say good-by t' sleepin' comfortable after t'night. Every time your moose rolls over, ye got t' be ready t' jump out of bed."

"Why, Aussy Parker," Ida cried. "I never rolled on ye in my life!"

"You bet ye ain't! But it's kep' me sleepin' with one eye open for thutty-five years. That's what I'm talkin' about, and that's what these poor girls are in for—without they run a couple of two-by-fours down the middle of their beds."

Web snorted, and Aussy nodded, and added, "Eyah, and some spikes would help—drove through with the points next the moose."

"I wa'n't thinkin' about your two-by-fours," Web said. "It was the idee of twenty-four-year-old girls." He chuckled. "Old maidens would be a sight better t' call 'em, and we'd ought t' go over back of Saddleback an' get some of them maidenhair ferns for 'em. They'd——"

"Well, we'd wear them, wouldn't we, Margaret?" Debby broke in. "I think they're lovely."

"A couple of Eves, in a couple of leaves," Web chuckled.

Wallace's insistent query cut through the laughter. "What's a maidenhair fern?"

"Just a very pretty fern," Debby told him. "Like thin feathers with tiny little leaves."

"Don't they look like hair?"

"No—that is, not so very much," Debby smiled. "But they do if you use your imagination."

"What's imaj-anashun?" Ting wanted to know.

Wallace looked at him derisively. "Don't ye know what that is? Why—it's like when we make Injuns and bears out of rocks and stumps an' such, an'——"

"O-oh," Ting burst out. "Let's scalp us some maidenhair Injuns!"

"What is it that little boys should be?" Susan reminded him gently.

Ting sucked his upper lip into the gap between his teeth and slid down in his chair with a guilty grin. After supper, friends kept dropping in and it was late before Simon got back from taking Debby home. He wondered, getting into bed, what sleeping with somebody would be like. He had always slept alone and he knew, from the way he sometimes got wound up in the sheets, that he rolled some. It wouldn't be funny for either of them if he should knock loose some of Debby's teeth or give her a black eye with his elbow. The idea of two-by-fours down the middle of the bed might not be bad. He fell to sleep smiling over it.

30

THE raucous argument of several crows in the elms outside his window waked Simon. Ordinarily such a disturbance would have sent him downstairs and out the side door with Web's gun. But it didn't bother him this morning. He lay flat on his back in a pleasant glow. This was his wedding day. A quizzical smile hovered about his eyes and mouth as he took stock of himself. He didn't feel at all fluttery; his stomach didn't feel like an empty washtub, and he didn't feel like running off and hiding. These prophecies of Web's were all wrong. He stretched luxuriously and yawned and lay there grinning at the ceiling. Nothing like that at all. He couldn't, he told himself, see how he could feel much better.

He slid himself out of bed and dressed. There wasn't a sound downstairs. It would be, he thought, a good time to go down and shave and get it over with. The water was still warm in the tank at the end of the stove. He stropped his razor quietly and shaved both ways, down and then up, and his fingers explored the result for skips. Just as smooth, he told himself, as one of his hornbeam ax handles. He spread the lather back of his neck and behind his ears, rubbed it in and washed it off. Then he scrubbed his teeth and gathered up his kit and went outdoors. The air had a fresh clean smell of woods and earth; it was warm and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Too bad, he told himself, to have to spend any time at all in a stuffy church on a day like this. He hoped they would have all the windows open.

Quietly, he slipped upstairs again. He got out all of his old clothes and shoved them into his turkey. Then he got out his new clothes, suit, shirts, underclothes, socks, shoes, and two

neckties, and packed them into a new canvas-covered telescope. There were voices downstairs now, Web's and Susan's, and he went down. They were in the kitchen. Web lifted a dripping face from the wash pan in the sink and scowled at him. Susan looked at him with very bright eyes. She laughed, a low note, and ran to him.

"You look so fresh and sweet," she cried, "I've got to kiss you!"

Web snorted. "Sweet! 'Y gorry, wouldn' ye know it? Look at him! You'd think gettin' married didn't mean any more to him than getting a hair cut! It ain't right! Here I been waitin' all these years t' see him shake in his shoes like I done, and he don't shake 's much as a junk o' cold lard." Web scowled again and dried his face, muttering into his towel.

Simon grinned at Susan. "I can't figure it," he said. "What in Jericho is there about gettin' married to scare anybody? You wa'n't scared, was ye?"

"No, and I don't see why anybody should be. But Web was—he was shaking so he could hardly get the ring on my finger; and Freem and Debby are both scared. Debby won't show it much; but she is—she told me so last night. And poor Freem——" Susan laughed. "Marg'ret said when they went home last night he just begged her to run off with him and get married where nobody would see them."

Simon laughed, and Web said, "Now you hold on. I been through it and you ain't. I'm tellin' ye it's nothin' t' laugh at, and like enough ye'll have t' grab onto Freem and hold him up. It wouldn't be so funny if his legs give out in the middle of it. That's what mine dam' nigh did, and Freem's near twice as heavy as I was."

Simon grinned, but he couldn't help thinking about it while they did the chores. His stomach got to feeling a little hollow and he wondered if it was going to get him, too. But the uncertain feeling disappeared when he'd had his breakfast. He filled and lit his pipe and looked about the table with a contented grin. Then his grin slipped a little. Dinner today would be his last meal here—his last regular meal, and it would seem kind of queer to be living in the village and not be eating with Web

and Susan and the boys. He took a long pull at his pipe and filled his lungs with smoke, held it a moment and then blew it out gustily.

"Ye know," he said, "it's goin' to seem funny bein' split up. We'll have to eat around with each other for a while till we kind of get used to it."

Susan's eyes filled and her chin quivered. "That's——" she swallowed and gave her head a shake, and exclaimed in a rush of words, "Oh, let's not talk about it—or think about it. You boys clear out of here now. All of you. I've got work to do and I don't want any of you under foot." She jumped up and her hands flew about, gathering and stacking dishes.

"Well, I reckon I'll go up to the house," Simon said to Web. "Comin' up?"

"No, I'm goin' over t' Jessup's Mills with Pa for a couple of hours. True Bascom's been linin' up fellers for the creamery and we're goin' over t' see 'em about it."

Simon had forgotten about the creamery. "Ye ain't lettin' much grass grow around it, seems as though," he remarked.

"Don't cal'late to."

"Well, when ye have the meetin' here, count me in."

Web's eyebrows went up and he asked dryly, "Ye figurin' t' buy a cow?"

"You know I ain't; but I got some money in the bank that ain't earnin' much int'rest."

"Man!" Web said softly. "Ye start talkin' cash money around here and ye'll likely find yourself in the creamery business."

Simon laughed. "Oh, no I won't. I'm aimin' to make a dollar, not lose it."

They were out on the porch now, and Web slapped him on the back. "Well, mebby we'll let ye in on it," he said and his eyes twinkled. "Ye go around offerin' money like that, ye'll likely lose it anyways."

Simon jammed Web's hat down about his ears and went down the driveway chuckling.

Otis and Lester Wick were already at the house, and the Benton boys were coming down the hill. They got to work immediately and by ten o'clock the last of the heavy timbers were in place. Simon stepped back and looked over the frame.

"It's a good job," he said. "It'll stand for a long time after I'm gone."

He hung around for another half-hour and then went up to see how Freem was getting along. Freem was puttering around the dooryard, picking up nails and other small things that had escaped his rake.

" 'Y gorry, I'm glad t' see ye," he exclaimed as Simon came in.

Simon grinned. "What's the matter—ye ain't scared, are ye?"

"Eyah, I am. Stand close by me when we're up there, will ye?"

Simon tried not to laugh but he couldn't hold it in. Freem looked so like a very much overgrown and badly frightened little boy. He looked, Simon recalled, just the way he had long years ago when he'd broken the mirror that hung over the kitchen sink.

"Remember," Simon laughed, "when ye tried to shift that mirror and it come down an' busted all over the floor?"

Freem grinned faintly and nodded.

"Ye look just like ye did then," Simon told him. "Scared half to death—ye couldn't think of anything but seven years' hard luck, and ye didn't even get a lickin'."

Freem ran his tongue along his lips. "Eyah, I know. But—" he gulped—"that was diff'rent. It wa'n't like standin' up in front of everybuddy in the village an'—" he gulped again—"everybuddy lookin' at ye and—'y gorry, Simon, I just don't see how I'm a-goin' t' make it!"

"You got some cider, ain't ye?"

"Eyah, but—" Freem looked dubious—"I dunno's I can hold any more right now. I just been drinkin' some."

"How much ye had?"

"Why, I reckon I've drinked a couple o' quarts—so far."

"And it didn't do ye any good?"

Freem shook his head. "Just swells my belly."

Simon grunted, and then began to laugh. He laughed till his sides ached, and Freem so far forgot his troubles that he grinned.

"Godfrey 'mighty," Simon said at last. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose. "Ye beat 'em all. Dang if ye don't. But don't you fret; I'll be right there with ye. And don't think anybody'll be lookin' at ye—Susan was sayin' just this morning that the way Debby an' Marg'ret'll be rigged out, folks won't

hardly know you and me are there—without ye stub a toe and fall down."

Simon turned to the house. "How's it look inside now? I ain't been up since ye got everything in."

"Looks kind of nice," Freem said with an eager note. "Come on in an' take a look—Marg'ret's got it slicked up just like Debby's got the Dixon place. You wouldn't hardly——" Freem paused, looking down the road. "Here comes Web."

Simon glanced about. Web was walking rapidly and there was something about him that made Simon turn and look more closely at him. Web came into the dooryard. He looked worried and his voice was anxious, when he said:

"Ye seen anything of the boys?"

"No," Simon told him. "What's the trouble?"

Web looked at Freem, and Freem said, "Seems as though I see 'em when I was comin' up here, but it might of been yeste'day."

"Well, I reckon the's no use worryin'," Web said. "But it's kind of queer. I never knew 'em to be gone s' long—ain't nobody laid eyes on 'em since breakfast."

Simon chuckled. "We wa'n't much older than them when we was rammin' through the woods and all over. I wouldn't fret any; they'll show up at dinner."

"Mebby ye don't know it's past eleven right now," Web said. "If you fellers are aimin' t' get your swim, ye better get goin'."

Freem glanced at his watch. "Gorry Peter, I didn't know it was that late." He hurried into the house and came out immediately with a large carpetbag, and the three of them went down the hill and across the bridge. Opposite the lumberyard, Web said to Simon:

"You and Freem go on up—ye need t' get cleaner'n I do." His eyes twinkled briefly. "I'll bring out what ye need."

"Just bring my new telescope," Simon told him. "Everything I'll want's in it—and don't forget to bring some soap."

"And a curry comb and scrubbin' brush," Web grinned.

He went on up the road, and Simon and Freem turned in through the lumberyard and walked up the stream to the bend. There was a narrow strip of grass-grown gravel there. It shelved

off into deep water and made a good place to dress. They dropped down the bank, and Simon whooped:

"Last one in's a nigger baby!"

Clothes flew every way and the two white bodies sprang across the beach and hit the water together. They raced across to the opposite bank and heaved mud at each other and slid down the smooth clay as they used to do when they were boys. When Web arrived they were splashing about and blowing like a pair of polar bears. He threw the soap to them and they soon looked more like polar bears than ever.

"Don't wear that soap clean out," Web called. "I'd like a junk of it." He knifed into the water, chugged across and back and proceeded to lather himself.

"Kind of puts an edge to ye, don't it?" Simon remarked as they came out.

"Sure does," Freem grinned. "I'd forgot it was s' much fun."

"The boys home yet?" Simon asked Web.

Web shook his head. "Not a sign of 'em. I was up around here and over through the woods back of the pasture before I went up the hill. And Susan's been all over the village. Looks like they'd crawled into a hole an' pulled it in after 'em." Web grinned, but it looked like an effort.

"Ye say the' ain't nobody seen 'em?" Simon asked.

"Nobody we know about."

"Well, that ought to make it easier to find 'em. About the only place they could go without bein' seen is upstream or downstream. And if they don't show up at dinnertime we can round up the fellers that know the woods and send half of 'em each way."

"That's what I figured," Web said. "About everybody'll be at the wedding and we can strike out and hunt up the boys right after."

They hurried into their clothes and went home across the pasture. Susan saw them coming and met them in the dooryard. She was pale and her eyes were anxious. She shook her head to Web's questioning look, and said:

"We've sent word to everybody we could to come early. I guess there isn't much else we can do till they get here. Dinner's

ready; it's mostly cold but it's the best I could do. You better come in and eat now; you, too, Freem; there's plenty. No, don't touch me," she said to Web. "I'd likely let go, and I——" she pressed her lips together and locked her fingers. "Go in and eat."

Without further words they went in the house.

Debby and Margaret had set the time for the double wedding at one-thirty. Afterward they were to row upstream with their new husbands, have a picnic supper and come home by moonlight. Simon thought of this with regret, and didn't give up the idea entirely. It was quite possible they would find the boys in time to go upstream as they had planned. But the boys, he knew, were strong and active; they'd been gone for more than five hours and, very likely, had been lost for more than half of that time. It was also more than likely they would keep on traveling. They wouldn't admit they were lost, any more than he and Web had when they'd been turned around. And, like himself and Web, they might find their way out before dark. But they were younger and their experience in the woods was so much less. They might even not know which way to follow the stream or a road, after they'd once been turned around. If they hadn't gone in a circle they might be five miles away by now.

The more Simon considered the possibilities the less optimistic he was about the picnic. He wasn't particularly worried about the boys. There was nothing in the woods to hurt them, unless they ran across an old she-bear with cubs, which wasn't likely; and any other animals they might meet would be more frightened than they were. That was about all that could happen to them. They'd just be a pretty badly scared and tired pair of boys when they were found. And they'd remember it. It wasn't any fun to be lost in the woods. Simon recalled the times he and Web had got turned around in the woods and had barely got out before dark. It was a pretty mean feeling.

The last half-hour before they all went to the church seemed to drag out forever. It was one o'clock when the wedding party arrived. Everybody in the town seemed to be there. The hitch-rails were crowded and single horses and teams were even tied to the cemetery fence. Never had there been such a wedding in

the village. The brides and grooms and their families walked up the side aisles and around to the pulpit. The Reverend Wilson bowed his head in the briefest of prayers, descended from the pulpit, and almost as briefly pronounced the two couples man and wife. Simon kissed Debby and Freem kissed Margaret.

That was all. The ceremony was over. And Simon, walking down the center aisle with Debby, could scarcely credit the fact that they were married. At the door he looked back. Freem and Margaret were right behind them, and back of them the aisles were full of people. Men and women poured from the church, the women gathering about Susan and Debby and Margaret, the men hurrying off—those living in the village, to their homes, others to their wagons and horses, some merely taking off their coats and changing their foot gear, while others took bundles behind the wagon shed for further changes.

Simon squeezed Debby's arm. "We'll be back soon as we find 'em," he said, "and finding 'em won't take long once we run across their tracks."

He and Freem and Web set off down the road to put on the clothes they had worn that morning. When they came out of the house, Simon counted thirty-eight men in the dooryard, able-bodied men who knew the woods; and while Web was outlining the plan of action eleven more men came in.

31

"We'll split up in three bunches," Web said. "The biggest terr'tory is up the stream, and I'd like around twenty of ye that know the lay up there to go along with me. I'd like about a dozen of ye to go downstream on this side with Freem; and another dozen t' take the other side with Simon. I'd like each bunch t' spread out in a line so's ye can see each other, and work back an' forth till we find 'em. Anybody think of anything else?"

"I was thinkin'," Lish Morrison said, "if we don't happen t' find 'em before sundown, it'd save us a lot of hollering and gettin' lost ourselves, if we took along some o' them cow and sheep bells I got down t' the store."

"Good idea," Simon said. "I'll go down with ye and get 'em."

While they went after the bells, Ezra Graham and Lester Wick went after their guns, and Web got his. There were bells to spare; every man except those with guns carried one, with the clapper muffled, slung on a cord about his shoulders. And so they started. Simon took his group across the tannery dam and through Aussy's field to the woods beyond, where they spread out. There wasn't much territory to cover there and Simon went ahead to look for tracks along the stream as far as the bridge. He was pretty sure they hadn't come this way; if they went a mile in any direction they would come either to the stream or the road, and if they went the wrong way then, they would come to the bridge and know where they were. But they might have crossed the road and be between it and Saddleback. With this in mind he followed the stream as rapidly as he could and not

overlook any tracks. There were plenty of coon and mink tracks along the bank and an occasional deer had wandered there, but he came to the bridge without discovering a trace of the boys. He started back along the road, watching along the edge; but the ground was so firm and the road so gravelly that he didn't even leave any marks with his own boots and he gave it up. The men were coming and he joined the line.

They finished combing that strip of woods and crossed the road toward Saddleback. Over there they spread out wider and struck east, paralleling the road and stream. Simon left them again, with instructions to keep on going east until he came back. Once more he went on ahead of them down the stream. He followed the first brook up to its spring on Saddleback and came down on the other bank. It was so rocky he didn't see any signs of any kind and he went downstream to the next brook. When he returned from his search of its banks, the men had caught up with him. He called them together.

"The' ain't much use lookin' for tracks around here," he said. "It's too hard and rocky. I'll go on up the ridge and come down Saddle Brook and if they've got that far I can tell it. I'll make it as fast as I can and I'd ought to hit the stream about the time you get there."

The line formed again and Simon set out for the deep notch between the humps of Saddleback. It was nearly four miles from where they were and some two miles from the point where its brook entered the stream. Simon held his course as surely as if the notch were in sight. Every little while he stopped to call and listen. The ground began to rise and kept on rising, steeper and steeper, until he reached the large shallow bowl beneath the notch. From there it was easier going. The springs had their source in the bowl and its sandier soil carried on down the brook. The banks of the brook were damp and soft, even boggy in places. Simon saw squirrel and rabbit tracks as well as those of heavier animals. Twice he came across men's footprints, but they were old. When he reached the stream he knew that the boys, if they'd come this way, hadn't come this far.

The men were waiting for him at the mouth of the brook. They walked back with him and spread out for the return trip.

He remained with them. They beat through to the Thurston pasture, turned and made another round trip between it and Saddle Brook.

"Well," Simon said, "they ain't between the stream and Saddleback, and that winds us up down that way. But they might have come this far and swung over the end of the ridge. They couldn't hardly do that without knowin' where they was goin', but they might of. We got close to an hour of sun left—just about time to make a swing through to the Bradbury place."

The line went over the low end of the ridge. Every twenty or thirty rods somebody would shout and the line would pause and listen. They came to the north end of the Plains, moved westward and came back through the Thurston wood lot. The half-mile line of men came out of the woods into the Thurston and Grant pastures shortly after sunset. The line curled in at the ends and bunched around Simon at the fence between the pastures. Nathan Gregg said:

"I cal'late it wouldn't be a bad idee t' stop in and see Wash an' Parker."

He gave no reason for the suggestion. He seemed to take it for granted that everybody knew of the freshly stirred bad feelings between Wash and Parker and Simon and Web. Nobody raised a question. Simon could feel them waiting on him, and he said:

"I been thinkin' of that off an' on all afternoon. But I don't figure they're into it. It'd be too risky for 'em."

"Fer Parker, mebby," Nathan said. "But Wash don't scare, and if he figured he could do dirt t' you and Web, he'd do it."

"Mebby," Simon admitted. "I figured I might stop in and see if they knew anything; but the' ain't any call for the rest of ye to go."

The men moved restlessly and several began talking at once. The consensus was that all would go and they set out along the fence in a compact group. When they came around the barn and sheep shed to the dooryard, there was a light in the kitchen. Simon went to the nearer window and looked in. Wash was sitting by the lamp reading the paper, his sock feet resting in another chair. Parker was at the sink washing the dishes. Simon

stepped quietly through the back entry to the kitchen, the others crowding after him.

Wash's feet dropped to the floor and he lifted one back to the chair with a grimace. He started to say something and appeared to change his mind when he looked beyond Simon. Parker turned and stared, flabby-lipped. A dish in his hand fell to the floor and broke with a crash that seemed loud.

"Come over here where we can see ye," Simon said to him.

Parker waddled slowly forward till the lamp light shone on his face.

"That's close enough," Simon told him. "Ye see anything of Web's boys today?"

Parker shook his head. His eyes didn't waver, nor did a muscle move in his face. Simon saw that he knew nothing about the boys, and he turned to Wash.

Wash leered up at Simon and his mouth twisted. "Think we'd tell ye if we had seen 'em?" he said in a hard, tight voice.

Nathan stepped in front of Simon. "Depends on how much ye think o' your neck," he said. "The's plenty rope an' plenty limbs and we ain't figurin' t' waste much time."

Wash leaned back in his chair and laughed, a short savage laugh without a trace of fear. Simon dropped a hand on Nathan's shoulder and faced Parker again.

"Has Wash been out o' your sight today?" he asked.

Parker's eyes darted back and forth between Wash and Simon and he licked his lips. Wash leaned forward, his eyes suddenly smoky; then he relaxed and laughed again. Parker's heavy jowls quivered, and he jerked out:

"I—I dunno. God 'lmighty, leave me alone!"

"Somebuddy git a rope," Nathan said.

Parker screamed, "No! He ain't been out the house all day! He got kicked in the leg last night and ain't even been to the barn today!"

"Let's see the leg," Simon said to Wash.

Wash's mouth tightened but he made no other move. Simon stepped toward him, and Wash's hand went to the lamp and he set himself to throw it.

"Ye better not come any closer," he said.

Simon stopped. "You goin' to show us your leg," he asked, "or ye want we should take your pants down for ye?"

"Mebby ye better try it," Wash said, and his mouth curled tauntingly.

Simon turned to the men behind him. "You fellers go outside a minute."

"I reckon not," Nathan said. "If he throws that lamp——"

"He ain't goin' to burn down his buildings just to keep us from seein' his leg," Simon interrupted.

Wash looked at Simon. All at once he laughed again, that short savage laugh, and his hand came away from the lamp. He boosted himself carefully to his feet. His eyes swept over the men and came back mockingly to Simon. He slipped his suspenders and pushed his pants and drawers to his knees. Then he turned his left thigh to the light and disclosed a large black and blue bruise.

"Does that look like I been kicked, or not?" he said.

There was no need for anybody to come closer. The bruise was plain to all, even to the ragged outline where the horse's shoe had struck a glancing blow. Everybody saw what it was. Some of the men muttered and two or three laughed.

"I reckon he ain't done much travelin' on that leg," Roger Benton said.

"Eyah," Simon said. He gave Wash a faintly sympathetic look. "Sorry ye got kicked, but I guess you're lucky your leg wa'n't busted." He turned to the door and followed the men to the dooryard.

"We better get on over to Web's," he said. "Mebby they know something new; and we'll want to eat, anyhow, before we start out again."

Freem and his men were already at Web's and Web arrived with his men soon afterward. None of them had found a thing that indicated where the boys might be. There was nothing to do but hunt in places where they hadn't hunted before. But first they ate; and the women passed among them with heaping platters of food and pitchers of milk and steaming pots of coffee. Then they started out again with some twenty more men from

Jessup's Mills, and Henry Locke who had come in late with the mail.

From dark until daylight lines of men ranged the valley and back through the hills. Bells clanged near by and tinkled musically in the distance. Overhead, the moon moved brightly across the sky, and in the darkness of the woods pale pin-point lights of lanterns bobbed.

Simon and twenty-five men took the eight or ten square miles of timber and thickets and swamps between the village and Spring Brook. He didn't think the boys could be in there. There wasn't any reason for it and, besides, they would have had to cross either the bridge or the sawmill dam and go up through Otis Wick's dooryard. They couldn't swim the stream, they hadn't taken the boat nor were there any logs or rafts that they might have used. It didn't seem possible for them to be up there; nevertheless, Simon and his men searched the territory almost rod by rod. For nearly half the distance to Spring Brook they struggled through swamps, cedar and alder and hackmatack, stumbling over roots and falling into potholes; but they made the rough round trip twice and came out on the hill above Freem's new house at two o'clock in the morning.

Simon saw Ormond Story mopping his head with a handkerchief. He thought nothing of it until he heard Henry Locke ask:

"How's it comin'?"

"Stoppin' up now, seems as though," Ormond answered.

Simon went over to him. "What happened to you?" he inquired.

"Fell into a stub," Ormond chuckled, "and it come nigh to scalpin' me like an Indian."

Something clicked in Simon's memory. Scalps. What was it about scalps? All at once it came to him. Wallace had wanted to know about maidenhair ferns, and Ting had said something about scalping Indians. Maidenhair ferns and scalps! And Web had mentioned that maidenhair ferns grew on the back side of Saddleback.

"Hey, everybody!" Simon called softly. The men came close and he told them about the ferns and scalps. "It may not be

worth a thing, but we been every place else and I cal'late we better try it. But don't say anything to the women folks; we'll just get a bite to eat and get on over there."

They ate and had a short rest and then crossed the low end of Saddleback where most of them had crossed it in the late afternoon. Now, however, they kept on east and spread out on the farther side of the ridge. Once more Simon struck out alone, straight for the damp and shady little hollow where he and Web had found the ferns. It was the only spot within miles of the village where he had ever seen them. It was scarcely a mile beyond the brook where he and Web used to trap and he was there in about ten minutes. He glanced about the hollow. In the failing moonlight and gray haze of dawn, he sensed rather than saw that something had been at the ferns. He dropped to his knees and found places where the ferns had been broken off, and holes where small clumps had been pulled up by the roots. His fingers touched a well-defined depression, the shape of a small boot track. He fumbled in his pocket for a match and whipped it across the seat of his pants. The head flew off and he got another and struck it carefully. He held it over the track and looked, and jumped to his feet, and called:

"Hel-l-lo-o-ow!"

Answers came almost like echoes from the men, half a mile away.

"Found their tracks," Simon shouted. "Keep a-coming—I'll go ahead!"

He struck off at his bent-kneed running walk, angling away from the ridge. Every three hundred paces, he called. The third time he shouted, he heard something that didn't sound like an echo. It came faintly from the direction of the ridge. He hesitated a moment and called again. This time the answer seemed to have two notes and he went at a plunging run toward it. When he came to the first rise of the ridge he stopped and called again. His ears were pounding so, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to hear; but the answer came clearly from near at hand; two breathless piping voices:

"Here! Here we are!"

And ten seconds later, Simon had Wallace and Ting in his

arms. He tried to speak, but his throat felt as if he'd swallowed a large pine knot.

"We—we kind of—got turned around," Wallace said.

Ting drew in a half-sobbing breath. Then his legs straightened with a wriggling jerk and he laughed. "Eyah," he cried, and wriggled again. "But we was comin' out! We got to where we could see the saddle an' we knew which way to go!"

"We'd of been out now," Wallace said, "but we got kind of tired."

"And hungry!" Ting yelped, and wriggled again.

Simon put them down and tried to unbutton his shirt. But his fingers seemed all thumbs and he jerked his shirt open and took out two rather damp and flattened parcels.

"The—" he cleared his throat—"there ye be. I reckon it'll hold ye till ye get home."

The boys ripped off the paper and fell on the food. "Don't hog it," Simon told them. "Eat it slow or you're like to have bellyaches."

While they ate, Simon called to the men. A moment later, Lester Wick's ten-gauge gun boomed twice, and Simon told the boys, "That tells the folks we've found ye."

"Oh," Wallace muttered with a full mouth. He chewed a few moments and swallowed. "Did—did ye get married?"

Simon chuckled. "Seems as though we did."

"All of ye?"

"Eyah, all of us—Debby and me, and Freem and Marg'ret."

"Oh." Wallace's head sagged forward and jerked up. "We—we thought it would be kind of nice to—" his head sagged again, and came up "—to get some of them maidenhair ferns—for Marg'ret an' Debby to wear."

"Eyah," Ting said. "But they make awful good scalps, too." He sighed and slumped sideways into a bush.

Simon picked him up. "You stay awake about a minute longer, the both of ye," he said, and felt in his pocket. He had lost his cowbell hours ago but he still had the cord. He tied the ends together and put the loop over his head. Then he got down on his knees.

"Now back up to me and hold up your arms," he told them,

and slipped the cord down around their chests. "All right now, put your arms down and sit back." He cupped his arms under their knees and rose.

"Now ye can make yourselves comfortable and go to sleep," he said, and headed for the men.

The sun was up when Simon and Debby went home. She was sleepy and pale from fatigue, but her expression was one of complete content as she watched Simon unlock the door. He locked it again behind them and they went into the sitting room. Debby reached her arms up to him with a happy sigh. Presently she leaned back and smiled dreamily.

"You must be awfully tired," she said softly. "And I know I can sleep all day."

32

EVERY summer since Simon had been going to the woods he had helped Aussy and Web with their haying. He didn't care much for it, but it was something to do, an outlet for the action that his system craved after he'd loafed about the village for two or three weeks. He would swing a scythe all day, trimming out in corners and along fences and cutting over rocky and boggy land where it was neither safe nor practical to mow with the machine. When the hay was dry and raked, he would take his long-handled fork to the windrows and nearly bury whoever might be on the wagon. And he always put away in the barn alone. The close air and dust in the mow were more than made up for by the action. The faster Web and Aussy worked the horse fork, and the bigger the bunches they sent up, the better Simon liked it. The iron horse fork would come creaking up with a mountainous load, the grapple would let go and Simon would sink a short-handled fork in the bunch, heave it back and tread it down before the next load came up. And when the wagon was empty, he'd drop from the mow, covered with dust and grass seed and dripping with sweat, and make some grinning remark about how slow they were.

This summer there would be more work getting in the hay. Instead of the sixty to seventy tons they usually put up, there would be nearer a hundred, and before they could get the extra hay, the road to Levi's meadow had to be cleared and the bushes and alder shoots cut out.

The day after the wedding Debby and Simon made up for the sleep they had lost. The next morning they rowed upstream to

Levi's meadow. They took their dinner with them and Simon took his ax and a one-man crosscut saw. He rigged up a head net for Debby and borrowed a pair of Web's overalls for her, and these with a pair of long-wristed gloves protected her from the mosquitoes and flies.

At first she insisted on wearing her skirts as well as the pants, but the combination was too warm and when she tried to help by carrying away brush, the skirts kept getting in her way, and finally she took them off and skipped about like a boy.

Simon had planned to have Ezra or one of the Benton boys help him clear out the road, but all of them were working on his house and he concluded to leave them there. Besides it would be more fun with just himself and Debby. It was fun, at first, but as the days went along he felt more and more handicapped. Debby was too much on his mind. He had to watch her to see that she didn't overdo or hurt herself, and even with her help he knew he could get twice as much done without her. He was glad when the road was cleared.

"Well," he said, as they rowed downstream, "I guess you're glad that's over."

Debby had discarded the head net after the first day and her face was scratched as well as bitten, but she smiled and shook her head. "I thought I'd roast that first day with my skirts on," she said. "And the head net was almost as bad. But when you're working you don't mind the bugs so much. No, I'm not a bit glad it's over."

Simon gave her a half-smile. "You'd like to keep at it all summer?"

"Well—" Debby hesitated. Then she admitted, "I guess I'd get pretty tired if I had to keep it up that long. How long will it take us to cut out the bushes?"

Simon grinned. "We ain't cuttin' 'em out. It would take too long to do it that way and we'd tramp down most of the hay just luggin' 'em off the meadow. It'll be a lot easier to cut 'em as we go. We can pitch 'em off to the outside where we've already cut and gather 'em up and haul 'em off later."

Debby's smile and small sigh showed her relief. "That would be better, wouldn't it?" Her face brightened. "And now I'll

have time to get you some good suppers and think up different things for your dinner."

"And mebby I won't be glad to get back home at night and find you waitin' for me," Simon told her.

They laughed together, and Simon lost completely the irritation that had been building up in him. He thought Debby looked better, too, and he began to wonder if it wouldn't be better for both of them if she didn't go into the woods.

A few days later he had a letter from Brink. Brink was sorry they hadn't been at home so they could have come over for the wedding, and he demanded a full account of it and of Debby. About the woods, he wrote:

"I am not going to ask Helen about going in. She might go in just to please you and me, and I know she will be a lot happier in Wateegan. The woods ain't easy on a woman and Helen has her social things here to keep her busy all winter. If she was young like your wife, she might get along all right for a spell, but I don't think even a young woman could stand it for long.

"I will tend to everything here so you can stay with your wife till we are ready to leave for the woods. Jed has not bought into the railroad yet, and we have a big cut ahead of us for this winter."

Simon was much relieved that the letter was in line with his own conclusions. He showed it to Debby and she seemed to feel as he did about it.

"I love the woods," she said. "But if I spent a whole winter in them I might get to hating them and—I want to keep on loving them." She smiled at him wistfully. "I'll miss you terribly but I'm sure we'll get along ever so much better if I don't go with you. Teaching keeps me busy, and I like it, and you'll be busy in the woods, so the time won't seem so awfully long, and just think how glad we'll be to see each other in the spring!"

Simon regarded her fondly. "Eyah, we'll have the spring to look ahead to. But it ain't going to be easy to go off and leave you."

"Let's not think of that. We still have nearly two months before either of us has to go."

Aussy and Web and Simon started cutting Levi's meadow the third week in July. They carried their dinners, and one day while they sat in the shade, eating, Aussy said:

"It won't be long now before we have t' start thinkin' about the elections this fall." He looked at Simon. "Web says ye don't take t' the idee of runnin' for the legislature."

Simon gave him a half-smile and shook his head. "I'd be worse'n a fish out of water. Even if I wanted to run, I wouldn't know how to go about it or what to do if I got elected. But we got forty to fifty million feet of logs to get out this winter and next, and it's goin' to keep Brink and me too busy to think of anything else. Anyhow, I don't want to run. Take me out of the woods in the winter and I'd—" he grinned—"well, they'd likely have to put me in jail."

Aussy's eyes twinkled. Then he grew serious again. "That's one of the big troubles with politics—the fellers that ought t' be runnin' our gove'ment are mostly too busy or just don't give a dang. And them that are runnin' it are thinkin' more about keepin' their jobs than they are about what's the best thing for the country." He shook his head.

"What we need is new blood," he went on. "Fellers that know something besides just politics and the law, and who ain't in politics just because they ain't got the gumption t' make a livin' anywheres else. Our gove'ment's gettin' t' be a business—a big business, even here in the state, and its' a whole lot bigger down t' Washington. It ought t' be run like a business and the fellers we elect t' run it ought t' be the best men we can pick."

"Why don't you run?" Simon asked him.

"Me? Why—" Aussy shook his head—"I been tryin' t' help run this town for close onto thutty years and I'm wore out at it. What we need is younger fellers; fellers that has some go to 'em, and——"

"How about Web?" Simon wanted to know. "Or George Benton?"

Web snorted. "Hell, who'd listen t' me?"

"I don't see how anybody could help hearin' ye," Simon grinned. "I bet ye could drown out any ten men in the whole legislature."

"Mebby I could," Web rumbled deeply, "but it takes more than noise t' get anywheres."

"Eyah," Aussy said. "It takes sense, and Web's got sense; but it takes more than just sense an' noise t' get elected. And that's another trouble—folks just won't take the time t' see that the feller they need gets elected. Seems as though the more they know about a feller the more likely they are t' vote for somebody they hardly know at all. That's how Cy Whitly got in, but he wouldn't of made it if he hadn't just won that will case up t' Fairview. I run against him six years ago, and Roger Benton run against him four years ago, and Henry Locke tried t' beat him out two years ago; and we all got licked. Now if Web or George was t' save somebody's life or do something big like that this summer, either one of 'em would likely snow Cy Whitly under; and that's what you would do to him, Simon, if you was t' run."

"But I ain't saved nobody's life," Simon laughed. "And folks know me as well as they do Web."

"No," Aussy shook his head. "They don't. The' ain't a dozen people in the whole town that really knows ye; but that ain't it so much with you—I mean that folks have always kind of looked up to ye, and I don't mean"—Aussy smiled—"just because you're big. Ye got what I heard a feller say once that Jim Blaine has, and that's personality. Folks like ye, but the most of 'em couldn't tell ye why t' save their lives. It's just that you're diff'rent, somehow, and I'd hate t' see ye waste it."

Simon felt uncomfortable. "I didn't figure I was wastin' anything," he said. "I been gettin' along right well in the woods."

"Eyah, I cal'late ye have," Aussy said. "But when a feller's born with something that makes folks look up t' him, it don't seem right for him not t' use it the best way he could. And I don't mean just smooth talkers like Cy Whitly; I mean fellers that's got sense t' go along with it."

Simon grinned. "Ye'd be takin' a mighty long chance on me, then; I ain't got the first idea of politics or anything——"

"I ain't talkin' about politics," Aussy interrupted. "I'm talkin' about gove'ment. We got too many politicians into it now and if we don't get in some fellers that'll run the gove'ment like a business, we're goin' t' be in a bad way."

"I thought everybody thought that Pres'dent Harrison was doin' a pretty good job."

"He is—s' far as he can go. But the Pres'dent don't make the laws; it's the Congress that makes the laws, and the most of 'em are thinkin' too much about politics t' vote for the right kind."

"Mebby we'd ought to turn over the law-makin' to the Pres'dent," Simon suggested. "If he's doin' a good job."

Aussy shook his head. "No matter how good a man he is, if the Pres'dent ever gets t' makin' the laws, we'll be right back t' where we was when we fought the Revolution. No, we got t' keep the law-makin' in Congress, and we got t' put the men in there who'll do the kind of job the country needs. Folks are takin' the gove'ment too easy and, if they don't get round t' takin' some int'rest into it, they'll wake up one of these days and find they ain't got what they thought they had."

"What ye mean?" Simon asked.

"Kind of hard t' tell," Aussy answered. "But a republican kind of gove'ment is about as hard t' keep as it is t' get—mebby harder. The trouble is that once ye get it and things is goin' good, everybody sets back and kind of figures it'll keep a-goin' all by itself. Then some day they wake up and find they ain't got a republic any more—like France did when Napoleon took it away from 'em. Only, if it ever happens here, it ain't likely we'd get out of it without another long fight, and mebby not then. What I'm comin' at is that if we like the way we're livin' an' doin' business, we got t' give the time it takes t' see that we keep it that way. We got t' be careful who we vote for."

Aussy spoke slowly, searching out his words, and Simon was impressed.

"Eyah," he said. "I see what ye mean. I hadn't thought about it that way before." He looked out across the meadow and smiled to himself at what Aussy thought he might be able to do. His abilities along those lines seemed to him to be totally lacking. Speech-making, law-making—involuntarily he shook his head; he wasn't equipped for things like that—all his equipment was for the woods, and the best use he could make of it was to keep on in the woods.

He looked at Web. "You're the feller to run for the legislature."

"Mebby ye better elect me, then," Web grinned.

An idea came to Simon, and he laughed. "Will ye run if I do some talkin' for ye?"

Aussy and Web glanced at each other significantly, and Web said:

"Sure; but you better do the runnin' yourself. Ye don't have t' spend all winter down t' Augusty—the legislature don't start till after the first of the year and ye could get off t' the woods any time for a while after that."

Simon shook his head. "I don't know any more about lawmakin' than a woodchuck and, even if I did, I wouldn't be able to put my mind to it. I'd be thinkin' about the woods, knowin' I'd ought to be there. No," he shook his head again, "I got to be there. I got to help Brink get out what we've contracted for. Later on, mebby——" he stopped, wishing he hadn't said even that much, and knowing perfectly well that later on it wouldn't be any easier for him to leave the woods, even for part of the winter, than it was right now. "But I'll do some talkin' for ye, if ye think it'll do any good," he said to Web.

"It'll do a lot of good," Aussy rumbled. He looked pleased.

"We'll hold ye to it," Web laughed. "And ye can start in right after church next Sunday."

Between then and Sunday Simon got all the information on the subject they could give him. Talking for Web seemed an easy thing to do, but his first effort seemed to fall pretty flat. While men listened, they didn't seem particularly impressed and several asked him why he didn't run himself. It didn't occur to Simon to be discouraged. Rather, he was annoyed, and puzzled. In his opinion, Web had outstanding qualifications for the legislature and he made up his mind that others would see it as he did.

Debby was quick to offer her help, suggesting that they could go out together in the evenings and she could talk to the women while he talked to the men.

Simon had already learned that the women had a good deal to say about how their men voted, and each week he and Debby

gave several evenings to visits in the village, to Jessup's Mills and Ricker's Falls and about the countryside. Simon talked easily. Trying to interest men in Web's abilities keyed him up. But it took time, and it wasn't till he'd grown familiar with his subject and put in ideas of his own that he began to feel that he was making progress.

When Web's and Aussy's hay was in, Simon had more time with Debby. They spent most of their mornings about the house, sometimes going across the road to the new house, where Otis and Lester worked on dull days when they had finished their own haying. In the afternoons Simon and Debby walked in the woods and fields or rowed upstream in the boat, and twice a week they borrowed Aussy's horses and wagon and did some daylight electioneering.

Almost before they knew it, September came, and with it a full moon in a cloudless sky, bringing the first frost, a heavy frost that lay thick and white like fine snow in the fields and gardens and dooryards in the early morning. Later, with the sun, potato and tomato plants, the beans and squash and pumpkin and cucumber vines, all turned black and pulpy. Simon sniffed the air that early morning and felt tingle after tingle run down his back. Fall was here.

Each succeeding day, Simon grew more restless; the woods were reaching out for him again. And at the same time, he didn't see how he could leave Debby. He took her into his arms and told her so, and she snuggled up to him and, after a little, looked up at him and smiled.

"But you aren't leaving me," she said. "I'm leaving you. School begins next Monday and you don't have to leave for another week."

Simon patted her cheek. "Ye think I could stay here after you've gone?"

"But you ought to stay and do some more talking for Web," she said.

Simon shook his head. "I couldn't keep my mind on it. And if folks ain't ready to vote for Web now, the' ain't anything I could say to change 'em. No, we'll leave here together."

Sunday afternoon they drove to Fairview behind Aussy's

horses and stopped at the house where Debby had lived for the past three winters. Simon was pleased with the house, and with Mrs. Adams. Both had a comfortable and dependable look, and Simon felt he could leave Debby there without being uneasy about her. He carried in her things and helped her get settled, and they had their last night there together. In the morning, when the livery man brought around the horses, Debby held to Simon tightly, and whispered:

"You'll try to come out for Christmas, won't you?"

"Eyah," he told her huskily. "It'll seem like a mighty long time."

Debby nodded and her eyes were wet when she kissed him. "It will be a long time," she said. "But we'll both be busy, and maybe it won't seem quite so long. Take care of yourself and don't—don't try to come out if the going's too bad. I'd rather wait till spring than have anything happen to you."

Simon smiled. "Don't ye get to worryin' about anything like that—the woods are second nature to me."

Ezra was coming over to Brent's Falls on the stage with Henry Locke, and Simon left the horses and wagon there for him to take home and caught the morning stage for Wateegan. It seemed to him that he'd left half of himself behind; and Debby's letters helped to keep that feeling alive. An ironical note from Web in November told him briefly about the election. "Well," Web wrote, "the votes are counted and Cyrus Whitly is in again. He beat me by fifty-two votes, and that's the closest anybody has come to beating him. Everybody says if you had been running you would have turned the trick. So you had better get ready to run next time."

Simon was disgusted. He couldn't understand how people, with supposed good sense, could vote for Whitly instead of Web. He concluded that people who voted that way only got what they deserved. He had difficulty putting his whole mind to his winter's work; and that annoyed him, as he wanted to get it far enough along by Christmas so there would be no question of his getting away for a while.

The logs piled up along the roads. The ground froze and boggy places were treaded down in the main roads so they would

freeze solidly. The snow grew deeper and was packed down and iced for the big log sleds.

"You reckon we can both go out at Christmas?" Simon said to Brink the second week in December.

Brink grinned. "You can, anyways."

"But we're gettin' along fine," Simon said. "We could almost knock off altogether for a week or so."

"That's the trouble," Brink said. "We're doin' so good I'm afraid to let go. I've figured it this way: you go out the week before Christmas and get back so I can get out for New Year's Day. We can keep things movin' right along that way and get out mebby better'n twenty-five million."

Simon didn't argue about it; their contract for logs was wide open this winter, and next year they might have no contract at all. For the next few days he was all over the cuttings, assuring himself that the work was going well and leaving instructions for the time when he'd be away.

"Keep her movin', John," he said to the woods boss.

And Big John Hooley laughed. "She'll keep a-movin'—time ye been out as often as Brink, ye won't think nothing about it."

Simon realized then that he was all nerved up. It would be the first time he'd left the woods in the winter and while he didn't have the feeling that all work would stop the moment he left, he couldn't help feeling uncertain about it, a little guilty, and with a deep-rooted feeling of regret that even the thought of Debby couldn't overcome.

Bundled in bearskins and a great buffalo robe and with a lantern under the sleigh seat, he started down-river in the early morning starlight. The runners squeaked on the frosty snow and the breath of Brink's driving horses sprayed out in ghostly plumes. Wind kept the ice of the upper river mostly free from snow, and the horses settled down to a steady trot that put the miles behind them.

On the carries and farther down-river where the snow had stuck to the ice, the supply teams from his own and other lumber camps had kept the road broken. Simon stopped to feed and rest the horses some thirty miles down-river, and at seven o'clock that evening he drove up to Brink's house. He could scarcely believe

he had made in one day all those miles of river, miles that usually took them more than a week to cover when they went up in bateaux in the fall, and from three to five weeks coming down with the drive in the spring.

He took the early stage for Brent's Falls the next morning and every mile found him in an increasing state of suspense. Had Debby got his letter? Would she be there waiting for him? He wasn't sure that she could get away from school so early. The horses increased their pace as they neared the Falls, but the long four-seated sleigh seemed to crawl. Simon's eyes fixed on the old tavern as soon as it came in sight. Was Debby there?

The bells jingled louder as the horses put on a final burst. Simon saw a spot of red at the tavern door. It moved out on the stoop, a funny flat red hat, like a pancake tilted on one side, and the woman who wore it had on a long black coat. Simon had thought he'd know Debby as far as he could see her, no matter what she wore, but he didn't recognize her now till he saw her face.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were very bright and she waved her red mittens at him and laughed. He was out of the stage before it stopped and had her in his arms. Neither of them seemed to give a thought to the other people smiling at them.

"I thought you'd never get here," Debby whispered. "I've been waiting and waiting!"

Simon grinned at her and held her off and looked her over. "First time I've seen ye in winter clothes in I don't know how long," he said. "That hat kind of had me fooled for a minute."

"It's a tam o' shanter," she told him. "Do you like it?"

"Eyah"—he grinned—"and the coat, too. I never see ye lookin' better."

Debby laughed happily. "And you, you great big bear. My, what a coat that is. It is a bearskin, isn't it?"

"Eyah, Brink's. I dunno but I'll have to get one of my own. Well, let's get going—we got a house to get warmed up before dark. Your things inside?"

Simon got them and put them and his telescope valise in the sleigh he hired. Debby gave him a twinkling look, and inquired:

"Aren't we going over with Henry?"

Simon laughed. "You know we ain't. There ain't goin' to be more than just you and me around for quite a while yet!"

He had forgotten what it was like to be at home at Christmas time and he didn't have anywhere near the time alone with Debby that he wanted. People kept coming in, and they were invited out so much. The days went faster than he'd ever known them to go. Nine days, and he was back in the woods. And there, those nine days lost their reality and seemed like a dream, the pleasantest dream he'd ever had. There was disappointment, too, but it didn't, he told himself, amount to much, as there was still plenty of time for babies.

When Brink went out, the day after Simon arrived, Simon gave him a list of things to send over to Council Rock for the new house: the Spanish leather chairs, the rosewood piano and the art squares.

"You know where to send for 'em," he said to Brink, "and I want 'em just like yours. Only we'll need more of the chairs and the art squares." Simon grinned. "You'll know why when ye come over next summer and see the place. It's most finished now and time these things get there, they can be put right where they belong."

Brink was gone ten days and almost his first words to Simon on his return were, "Well, I ordered your stuff and they promised to have it at your house by the first of March. They got to set up the piano anyhow and they said they'd haul it all in together."

The rush of work kept the days moving quickly. Logs were going now from the high-piled brows to the river ice and to higher-piled rollways on the banks. It was a race to get them all to the river before the break-up came, and that came early. The ice went out the last week in April and by the first of May the river and streams, swollen by melting snow and rain, had risen to driving pitch. The rollways on the river and Pigeon Creek were broken out and the logs started for Wateegan.

Simon scarcely felt a twinge that spring as he watched the break-up approaching, and now that he was on his way down-

river he fairly pushed the drive ahead of him. The last letter he'd had from Debby had told of the arrival of the new furniture. Freem had gone in for her when it came and had brought her out over Saturday and Sunday.

"The house is perfectly lovely," she wrote. "Those huge chairs and rugs don't look at all big, because the sitting room is so big. And that beautiful piano! Oh, Simon, I'm so happy I can hardly wait till you get here."

Simon came down with the rear of the drive and did three men's work, picking logs off rocks and pulling them out of logan holes. Men referred to that drive in later years as "the spring when Brink Archer's rear come close to beating the head of the drive to Wateegan."

The last log was boomed on the second day of June and Simon got his turkey from the wangan and went ashore. He walked home with Brink. When they came in sight of Brink's square house, Simon saw two women on the front stoop. One of them went inside and something about her quickened Simon's pulse.

She looked a little like Debby, but Debby would still be at school—it didn't let out for close to two weeks yet.

"Who's that?" Simon asked. "Ye didn't tell me ye had comp'ny."

Brink's eyes crinkled. The head of the drive had reached the booms days ago and Brink had been sleeping at home since then.

"No, I didn't tell ye," he said, and hooked his arm in Simon's. "But she's a right nice girl. Been stayin' with Helen for close to a week. Come here kind of upset about something." He gave Simon a quizzical smile. "Didn't ye recognize her?"

A warm smothered feeling almost stopped Simon's breath. "Debby?" he managed to ask.

Brink nodded, and Simon half towed him along the sidewalk. Suddenly he asked, "What's she upset about?"

"Just a piece of bad luck; nothin' to work up a sweat over. It's likely made her feel a lot worse than it will you. But I figure the main reason she come was that she couldn't wait any longer to see ye." Brink grinned, but Simon caught a touch of sympathy in his eyes.

Helen Archer, plump and rosy-cheeked, came out to the street to meet them. Simon had always liked her. Her unfailing good humor and pink plumpness reminded him of Ida Parker.

"You've got the nicest wife," she declared, as they shook hands. "I'm just sorry the both of you don't live here right alongside us." Her bright eyes looked him over. "You need a haircut and a shave, but I guess you'll do. Poor girl, she's all worked up, and over something that wouldn't bother men like you and Brink five minutes. But it upset her so she couldn't go on teaching—she found a girl to take her place and came down here. You go in to her, and Brink'll take me for a walk."

Simon went in. He didn't know what to think. He couldn't imagine what might have happened. Then he saw Debby, and everything else went out of his mind. She ran to him with a little cry, half laugh, half sob. He held her close, and bent over pressing his head to hers. Presently she relaxed a little and he lifted her. She braced her hands against his shoulders and held herself away.

"No, wait," she told him. "Maybe you—won't want to kiss me when you—when you——" her lips and chin quivered like a broken-hearted little girl's, and she ducked forward and hid her face against his shoulder.

His laugh was soft and low, and he hunched his shoulder and rubbed his cheek against hers. "Don't ye know the' ain't anything could happen that would stop me from wantin' to kiss ye? Brink said ye had something to tell me, but it don't make a bit of diff'rence whether ye do or not."

"Oh, but I must!" Debby's breast moved against him in small jerks as she tried to keep from crying. "It's the house, Simon—our new h-house! It—" she trembled and a sob burst from her—"it burned—down! And it's all my fault!" She collapsed against him in a fit of weeping.

Simon's stomach felt suddenly empty. Burned?—their new house?—and the piano and chairs and art squares and their new big bed?—burned? It didn't seem possible. But here was Debby crying over it. And she'd said it was all her fault. A flash of anger swept through him. Her fault? He laughed shortly.

"I cal'late you had about as much to do with it as I did," he

told her. "How'd it happen?—I mean, what makes ye think it was your fault?"

Debby's voice was muffled against his shirt. "I was unpacking. Those new dishes—I had them in the kitchen where I wouldn't get the house messed up. There was a lot of paper and shavings and I thought I'd burn them. I—it must have made too hot a fire. But I didn't notice anything. It was just before supper. Ma was with me, and she didn't notice anything, either. I went home with her. Then we heard somebody yelling. I looked out, and there was our h-h-house——" Debby's shoulders shook again.

"Now, now," Simon said soothingly. "It must of given ye quite a turn, but you stop frettin' about it. Now tell me—how long after ye'd left did ye hear the yellin'?"

"It must have been about half an hour—maybe a little more."

"And it went up quick, did it?"

Debby's head nodded against his neck. "When we—when we looked out, the whole roof was on f-f-ire."

"Save anything?"

"No. Nathan Gregg was the first to see it, and he ran right across and tried to open one of the front windows; but the ceiling was all on fire in the sitting room. He went around to the other windows, and it was just the same. The plaster was dropping off the ceilings and the lath and rafters were on fire. About everybody was there in just a few minutes, but they couldn't get anything out. The fire had run down between the walls and was dropping on the floor. They just couldn't d-d-do anything! Oh, Simon, if I'd only just stayed out of the house till you came!"

"I would of liked to seen it once, but—when was this?"

"At Easter time. Web and Susan came in for me, and I was so—I wanted so much to have things all ready——" her voice broke again.

"Now you stop frettin'," he told her gently. "Even if ye'd waited for me to come, it would of burned down just the same."

Debby leaned back and looked at him. "You—you think it was——?"

"Set?" Simon finished for her. "Eyah, I do. Had any of ye been upstairs or in the attic?"

Debby shook her head. "I can't remember going upstairs, and I'm sure we weren't in the attic."

"Well, I cal'late if anybody'd gone up there lookin' for it, they'd likely found plenty of shavin's and paper shoved in between the rafters. What I can't figure is how they hooked it up with the stove."

"Why," Debby exclaimed. "That's just what Web said. He and Henry and Nathan were sure somebody set it. But they couldn't find any hole in the kitchen flue—just the pipe hole for the second-floor stove. And then they didn't know what to think."

"Well, it wa'n't your fault, anyways," Simon said. "The pipe went right through brick to the flue, and it and the range could of both got red-hot without hurtin' anything. Something was hooked up to the stove and the flue—rigged so it would catch in the second floor the first time the fire was lit. But I—— Ye see Wash or Parker around?"

"No. You—you don't think Wash would do a thing like that, do you?"

Simon's face screwed up. "I dunno what to think. But who else would have any call to do it?"

"I don't think he did it," Debby said. "I don't think he—I mean, if he ever did have any—any spite against us, I think he's all over it now. Susan told me he's been going up on Crockett Hill all spring to see Lizzie Maxwell."

"Her? Why—why, she's larded up like a hog!"

Debby smiled. "I guess you haven't seen her lately. She isn't fat any more—just big, and she's a mighty good cook and housekeeper."

"I'll be dog-goned," Simon muttered.

33

SIMON hired the liveryman to drive them home from Brent's Falls. When they came to the ruins of their new house, he had the driver stop. Another surge of anger swept him as he looked at the ashes and charred remains of timbers. Then he laughed and pointed at the Dixon place.

"We'll go over there," he said.

The driver nodded sympathetically. "I heard ye was burnt out, an' I hope ye catch whoever done it," he said.

"Well," Simon said, when they were alone, "this looks pretty good to me." His eyes wandered about the chummy rooms and he nodded. "Eyah, I dunno but I like it here better'n I would in the other place. But one of these days, when we get our family started, I cal'late we'll have to build it up again."

Debby's eyes filled and her chin quivered, and he took her in his arms and carried her to his big chair and cuddled her on his lap. They sat there for a long time without speaking.

Simon spent the better part of two weeks cleaning out the cellar hole. It was a dirty job and he was glad when it was finished. The foundations were cracked in places but they were still pretty well in line and could be fixed. What couldn't be fixed were five of the old maples in the angle of the two roads. They were scorched and withered beyond recovery and Simon cut them down, working them up into firewood.

Nearly every afternoon while he was at work he saw Wash drive around the turn and head for Crockett Hill. Wash would glance at the cellar hole as if he couldn't help it, but he never appeared to see Simon. Sometimes his eyes would narrow as if

the sight of the cellar hole displeased him; and back of that he had the look of a man intent on serious business. There was nothing about him, that Simon could see, that suggested a guilty conscience. It made Simon wonder.

For a week he'd been making a daily circuit of the Thurston place; sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon, but always when he was pretty sure of being seen. He did it to see what Wash and Parker would do about it. If either of them got nervous, he intended to pay them another visit. But it didn't seem to have any effect, certainly not on Wash, and he scarcely ever saw Parker, anyhow.

The last week in June, Wash stopped driving through the village. The Maxwells, coming down for their mail, said he'd gone away to find a man to help him with the haying. Lizzie Maxwell came down with one of her brothers that day, and Simon saw her for the first time in over a year. She wasn't, as Debby had told him, fat anymore. She was just big and strong and rosy-cheeked, about the healthiest-looking girl that Simon had ever seen. He was almost too surprised to answer when she smiled and spoke to him as if she'd never heard of any trouble between him and Wash. "It looks," she said, "like I was going to be a sort of sister-in-law to ye before very long."

"Why," he said, "that's fine! I'm mighty glad to hear it! When do ye aim to have the wedding?"

Lizzie flushed and laughed. "Wash figures we'd better have it right after he gets back." She laughed again, and added, "So's I can feed him up good while they're hayin'."

A few days later the word went around that Wash had returned, bringing with him a veritable giant of a man. Simon saw them both the next afternoon. They came to the store for the mail together. Simon was sitting on the store steps with several others when Wash and the giant came up. He thought he'd never seen a bigger man, not even Brink, and he wondered what part of the woods he came from.

He had another surprise when Wash and the giant stopped directly before him, and Wash looked at him, and said:

"Ye been wearin' a path around my place till I can't get a full day's work out of Parker." Wash smiled thinly. "This feller's

workin' for me now, and part of his job's to run ye off if ye come round there again."

Simon grinned. The man's small round hat, his woolen shirt, his woolen pants rolled up to the tops of his heavy boots, the very look of the man himself, put the label of the woods upon him. His shoulders moved slightly from side to side, his freshly shaved jaw pushed out at a truculent slant and his pale eyes looked down on Simon insolently.

"Workin' for ye, is he?" Simon chuckled. "First time I ever see a lumber hog willin' to take up farmin'."

The man's loose lips came together in a crooked line and his shoulders lifted, humping forward. "Is that so-o-o-o," he rasped.

"Eyah," Simon said, and his grin widened. "So ye think this feller can lick me, do ye?" he said to Wash. He shook his head. "Ye must of found him growin' somewheres in the pussy willows."

The giant let out a roar, and made a mistake. He lunged at Simon. And Simon came up from his seat on the steps, meeting him in a blur of motion. His left fist went through the giant's arms, straightening him up; his right lashed out and the man went backward, turning over in the air as if he'd been kicked by a horse. He struck the ground and lay there in a small cloud of dust.

"Get up," Simon told him, but the giant didn't move. Nor did he until considerable water had been poured on his head. Simon went across to the blacksmith shop and carried out Russ Graham's cooling tub. It was two-thirds full, and Simon emptied it on the lumber hog. The giant stirred, sat up, looked about dazedly, got to his feet and started for Crockett Hill. Wash went to him and caught his arm, turned him around and led him back and across the bridge.

Simon watched them, suddenly sorry about the whole affair. Provoking the fight made him feel cheap, even though he knew it was what the man was there for. Then his eyes brightened. Hiring a man to come at him in the open was more like Wash. And Wash had taken the man's downfall strangely; he'd seemed more awed than he was chagrined.

Simon carried the cooling tub back to the blacksmith shop and came out, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand and looking at the still silent men on the steps and in the road.

"Godfrey 'mighty!" Lish Morrison quavered. "I thought ye'd killed him!"

Simon shook his head. "Ye can't kill that kind—not by hittin' 'em, anyways. And that feller's jaw was like iron. I thought for a minute I'd busted my hand."

He stood in the road watching Wash and the huge lumber hog until they made the turn. The man's head hung a little sideways and his shoulders had a humped look. Simon wondered what the man would do, and decided if he'd wanted any more he'd have stayed and kept on fighting; but it would be just as well to keep his eyes open and see that the man didn't try any tricks. But the giant left town that same afternoon.

Henry Locke, coming home late with the mail, reported passing him on the Falls road, and he wasn't seen again about the village.

That same afternoon Henry tacked up the notice in the store of Wash and Lizzie's coming marriage. Simon wondered if they'd have it in the church. He rather doubted that they would, as Wash hadn't been inside the church since their mother's funeral. The following week, Wash drove through the village and on up Crockett Hill, wearing a new suit and with a valise behind him in the wagon. Word came the next day that he and Lizzie had been married in Fairview and had taken the train from there.

Before Simon started for the woods that fall, a delegation came to see him. There were six of them: Aussy and Web, Henry Locke, Ormond Story, Roger Benton and Otis Wick. Simon thought they'd come to ask him to put more money in the creamery, but he'd already bought a thousand dollars' worth of stock and Aussy'd told him that was all the cash they needed.

Debby was doing the supper dishes when they came to the back-entry door. Simon took them through the kitchen to the sitting room and brought extra chairs. When they were all seated, Aussy said:

"We've come t' see ye again about runnin' for the legislature, and——"

"But the' ain't any election this year," Simon broke in.

"No. But we're figurin' t' get an early start for next year. That's how Cy Whitly come out ahead of Web last fall; he was workin' on the sly all that spring and summer—and if he spent as much time on his job as he does on gettin' elected, I cal'late we'd think he was a pretty good man."

"Eyah," Roger Benton said. "We want somebuddy down to Augusty who'll tend to his job."

"And somebody they'll pay attention to," Ormond Story added. "But first we got to put up somebody who can beat Cyrus Whitly, and we figure you're the only feller we got that can."

Simon smiled a little sourly. "What makes ye think I can do it?"

"Ye wouldn't be askin' that," Henry told him, "if ye'd been around here last fall. I dunno how many fellers I talked with said they wished ye was runnin', but they said they felt they ought t' vote for Cy because he'd done 'em some kind of favor or other."

"We all run into the same thing," Otis Wick said. "This feller Whitly's got quite a hold on a lot of people, and we ain't so sure we got anybody that can beat him; but if anybody can, it's you, Simon, and we want t' start in before ye git home next spring, tellin' folks you're runnin'."

Simon felt cornered. The idea of having to go to Augusta, and sit around in the legislature through tedious weeks and months when he might be in the woods, made him shudder. It was out of the question; but how could he tell these men? He'd known them all his life, all except Ormond Story; they were the backbone of the town, and they'd come to him, and he couldn't simply tell them no. He glanced about. They were all watching him, waiting.

Finally, he said, "It's like this. I got a job. It takes every minute of my time from daylight till dark just lookin' over the work in the woods, and every night the's figurin' to do. It's the only thing I know anything about. Now what would happen if ye got me elected? Ye say ye want somebody that'll tend to his

job in Augusty. But how could I do that, when I ain't got the first idea of what to do down there and, on top of that, I'd be thinkin' about the woods every minute, wonderin' how they was gettin' along?" Simon shook his head. "I ain't the feller ye want. Ye want somebody that knows what to do down there and that can put his mind to it."

"We've thought of all that," Aussy said. "And we still figure that you're the feller we need. We ain't figurin' on ye t' do so much at first except kind of look around and see what's goin' on. It's the railroads we're scairt of, and now that they see that this Interstate Commerce Commission can't do anything t' stop 'em, they may start raisin' their rates on us. And that's something we can't stand. You couldn't stand it, either, if your railroad jumped the lumber rates on ye so ye couldn't make a nickel gettin' out logs. Ain't that so?"

Simon knew only too well that it was so. It brought him up with a shock as he recalled what Brink had said, and he wondered how much nearer Jed Sawyer was to buying into the railroad. He nodded, and Aussy said:

"Well, that's the kind of fix we're in, in this town. We're shippers—we ship just about everything that we make and raise. Take the tann'ry: we bring in raw hides and we peel hemlock bark t' tan 'em, and then we ship 'em out. If we'd stopped there mebby we'd be better off, but we didn't; we started makin' starch, and growing all the potatoes we could for it; and then we started makin' cheese. That started us raisin' all our heifer calves and buyin' more milch cows, and now we got a creamery started.

"If we was the only folks that was doin' it, we'd still be gettin' along fine; but the's others makin' all them things—all over the country, and we don't get the prices we used to get. It's kep' us spreadin' out, shippin' more an' more, just t' keep enough cash comin' in t' keep us goin'. And now if the railroads start raisin' their rates—well, it don't take much figurin' t' know what would happen to us. If they built a hundred-foot wall around us, they couldn't starve us out any quicker."

When Aussy stopped, all eyes turned to Simon.

"But what," he asked, "could a feller like me do about it?"

"Just this," Aussy told him. "Get the lay of the land—talk

to the fellers there and when ye get 'em lined up, put through a law that'll make the railroads go to the legislature before they can raise their rates."

Simon gave him a one-sided smile that had no humor in it. He spoke with a touch of irony. "Ye sound like ye think all I'd have to do is talk to them fellers and they'd all vote the way I wanted 'em to."

"I'll guar'ntee one thing," Aussy told him. "They'll pay attention to ye. And if ye talk the sense we know ye got, ye'll find the most of 'em votin' with ye."

Simon grinned suddenly. "Right there's the trouble. I ain't made for that kind of thing. I couldn't keep my mind on any kind of law-makin' when I knew I ought to be in the woods."

"Aw-w, hell," Web rumbled, half serious, half laughing. "You just don't like the idee of stayin' out of the woods."

He spoke so truly that Simon couldn't answer.

"If everybody acted that way," Web went on, "we'd have nobody but politicians runnin' the country, and what would they do to it?—well, they'd just make a mess in three-four years that would take us ten times that long t' clean up. It's like Pa says—you remember what he said last summer?—we can't have a gove'ment like ours, and have it run the way we want it, without we give some time to it. And that means you as well as me. I tried t' get elected, and I cal'late I didn't care any more about goin' down t' Augusty than you do. I got business here, and I'd have t' leave Susan an' the kids at home alone. But you could take Debby along with ye, and ye could get off t' the woods if they needed ye. Ye better think it over. Talk t' Brink and see what he says, and let us know some time this winter. Will ye do that?"

It seemed to Simon that Web hadn't left him any alternative. He'd never known Web to be more aggravatingly shrewd. He felt like shaking him. At the same time he couldn't help looking at him with deeper admiration. Web was the one to go to the legislature.

"Eyah," he said. "I'll let ye know before spring." And he made up his mind that by that time he'd have figured a way to get Web elected.

34

THAT fall Simon again drove Debby into Fairview the Sunday before her school opened. He went on to Wateegan the next day. Brink had news for him. It seemed that Jed Sawyer was in a dilemma: his own timber holdings would last only another two or three years, depending on the cut, and he needed more timber; but if he bought control in the railroad he wouldn't have the money to buy enough timber, at least enough to make any money on the deal.

"It looks," Brink grinned at Simon, "like Jed had got himself into a hole. Anyways, he ain't goin' to bother us on this winter's cut. I been talkin' around some. I got all the other timber owners on the river together, and we told the railroad we wouldn't cut a stick this winter if they didn't give us a guarantee they wouldn't raise the rates till what we cut was all shipped out. The mills come in with us, and the railroad had to give in—it's makin' most of its money, these days, on logs and lumber. So we're fixed for another year. And if Jed don't take up his option on the railroad stock, old Trueman Libby and Joe Henderson'll buy it, and——"

"Them!" Simon laughed. "Why, that would fix us up fine, wouldn't it?"

"Couldn't be better. It was Libby sold me the timber we been cuttin' for the last dozen years or so, and it'll be Joe that sells us our next lay, and neither one of 'em would stand for any monkey business with lumber rates."

Simon laughed again. "That sounds mighty good, but I

cal'late I better forget about it till we see the last log on the rollways, come spring."

"Eyah," Brink nodded. "The both of us. It'll take some doin' to clean it all up this winter."

The woods crews had already gone upriver and Simon and Brink joined them a few days later. Most of the men had been with them for years, but always there were new faces, and Simon, looking them over this fall, saw one that seemed vaguely familiar. It wasn't the man's face that struck him; it was the man himself, his hugeness. He wore a full black beard and Simon couldn't remember his face at all, but there was something about him—his huge humped shoulders and the way his head hung a little to one side—that made Simon sure he had seen the man before. The man was a brow-tender and called himself Jackson, and good brow-tenders weren't easy to find; they had to be big and strong and quick and, above all, steady men of experienced judgment. Jackson seemed to have all those qualifications, and Simon, after looking him over, thought no more about him.

There was enough snow in late October and November to make good yarding—twitching the logs to brows along the main roads for easy loading, later, on the huge logs sleds that would haul them to the rollways on Pigeon Creek and Black Brook and along the river. The work went ahead at a rapid pace. The brows rose in great sloping piles as the logs were run up with slip-chains, pulled by wise elephantine horses.

Two weeks before Christmas the tote teams brought Simon a letter from Debby. She had some news, she said, that he might be glad to hear. She was going to quit teaching when the March vacation came, and go home and get ready for somebody who was coming to see them about the fifteenth of April; somebody they had never seen before; somebody—had Simon guessed it? She was sure it was going to be a boy, and she hoped he could come out for Christmas.

Simon's whoop lifted Brink from his chair. It seemed almost to lift the roof.

"A baby!" he yelled at Brink. "Debby's goin' to have a baby!"

Brink let out a roaring laugh and leaped at Simon. The camp

listened and came running to crowd about the windows and look in, grinning and wondering if the trembling logs would come down on their bosses. Simon saw faces pressed against the glass, and went to the door and told them. And the camp whooped and yelled congratulations, and whooped again at something else he told them. They were going out for Christmas! Something they had never done before and, very likely, never would again, and they showed their appreciation.

Simon went to the end of Number One road and came back on Number Two; out again on Number Three and over to Number Four. Back in the woods saws whined, axes chocked, trees came whooshing down with splintering shocks; teamsters yelled and logs came skidding across the snow. The brows were piling up. Simon came down Number Four road, still walking on air. He stopped at every brow, watched a log or two roll up and come to rest; then went on to the next. The huge bearded man, Jackson, had a brow on Number Four. He stood partway up the slanting tiers of logs, leaning on his cant dog, as Simon came along.

At the far end of the brow, the little Frenchman, Cloutier, leaned against his blanketed horse, and Simon said:

"What's the matter, Clootchy; can't they keep ye busy?"

Cloutier grinned. "Nah," he said, and spit. "I t'ink, mebby-so, I take 'Poleon an' go pull dem tree down ourself." His elbow nudged the big horse. "W'at you t'ink 'bout dat, 'Poleon?"

Simon glanced back in the woods at the sweating five-man crew; four at cross-cut saws, falling the trees and sawing them into logs, the fifth man notching and limbing, and they couldn't keep little Cloutier and his big horse busy. Simon smiled faintly and turned back to the brow. It looked solidly stable, except for the last few logs at the top. They didn't seem to lie as they should. Simon went around and stepped up on the sloping face.

"They give ye some crooked stuff up there?" he asked.

Jackson shook his head.

"I'd straighten up them top logs then," Simon told him. "They ain't settled."

"Mebby ye could show me how," Jackson muttered.

Simon looked at him in surprise. Then he laughed. "I dunno

but I could," he said. "What's the trouble?" He moved up a little higher on the brow.

Jackson mumbled something. Stepping from log to log he went up the brow, prodded the partly crossed logs with his cant dog and faced about, with the unstable logs between him and Simon. He began to inch them into place, working the pick deeper between them. All at once his feet seemed to go out from under him and he came back on the handle with all his weight. Simon heard Cloutier's yell of warning as the lower log came loose. It was some thirty feet up the brow above him and he wasn't alarmed about himself; he'd had logs come at him before and there was plenty of time to jump. But if the other logs got started, Jackson, lying there on his back, would be ground to shapeless pulp. The top tier moved and settled, and the loose log came bounding down alone. Simon whirled and jumped, angling sharply toward the edge of the brow. He landed on an iced-over spot, where snow had been ground into the bark and had melted and frozen. To save himself from falling, he had to change his direction and leap on down the brow. He could hear the log coming behind him, gaining momentum.

The brow was built against a low ridge, the two slopes making a trough. Simon went leaping for the snowy ridge, got part way up it, slipped and slid down. He flipped over on his back, digging in his heels and coming to his feet facing the brow. The lighter end of the bounding log was in the air, almost, it seemed in his face. His hands went out. The log seemed to float against them, but the jar of it ran up his arms and tore at his shoulders. He went backward, down; and the end of the log landed across his shins.

Simon could feel the bones crack and the muscles tear apart. For one agonizing instant his whole body seemed to burst with pain. Then he was numb, all over, and deathly sick. Heavy blackness beat against the base of his skull. It beat up through his head and blanketed his eyes. And through the blackness he heard men shouting a long way off and a jumble of sounds that seemed to come and go. The blackness rolled over him, burying him deeper and deeper. Nothing seemed to make any difference. Then he was conscious of men about him, movement. A throb

ran through him. It began in his legs and surged up through his body to his head. The blackness thinned and he saw a blur of things, some moving, some standing still. Another throb ran through him and he tried to sit up; but somebody's hands on his shoulders held him down.

"He's comin' out of it," he heard somebody say, and the voice sounded a long way off. "God 'lmighty, the way that log snapped him down, I didn't know's he'd ever come out of it."

Log? All at once Simon's eyes came to a focus. He frowned and blinked, and then recognized what he saw. Just beyond his feet was a sixteen-foot log, one end raised and resting on another. His legs throbbed again, and everything came back to him. That was the log that had knocked him down and broken his legs. He looked at his legs. They had a queerly shapeless look between his knees and ankles, and his pants were a little bloody around the tops of his boots.

His eyes lifted to the brow. Nobody was up there. Jackson had come down. Simon turned his head to look about him, and everything blurred again. Then his eyes cleared and he saw it was Joe Rainier and Frank Moody squatting beside him, two of the sawyers for this brow; his head and shoulders rested against somebody else behind him. He wondered if his eyes could look that high. They did, and he saw that the man who held his head was Steve McLeod, the camp clerk. Where was Cloutier, and where was Jackson? He frowned over this.

Then he heard himself ask, "Where's Clootchy an' Jackson?"

The sound of his voice gave him a queer feeling. It was like a child speaking. Waves seemed to be passing behind his eyes, like wind-blown fog or smoke coming up through his head. He blinked and shook his head. Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly and gave Ranier and Moody a one-sided smile.

"I must of been off my head," he remarked. He blinked again and his teeth came together as another throb struck up from his legs. "Boost me, Steve, I want to sit up, but I don't care about movin' them legs."

"Maybe you'd better lie still," Steve told him.

Simon put his mittened hands to the ground. "I ain't that bad off," he said. "Gimme a boost."

"How about your—back?" Steve asked uncertainly.

Simon bowed his back a little. "That's all right. The only place the log touched me was my hands and shins. Come on—I'd do it all myself but I want to keep them legs right still."

"Well—if you say so." Steve lifted, gently but firmly. "All right?"

"Eyah, that's fine." Simon pushed up the rest of the way himself. "All I needed was a start." He looked at his legs again. His mouth twisted, and then drew out in a grin. "They sure are a mess, ain't they? Reckon it'll take me a month or six weeks to get over it."

He saw Moody and Ranier look at each other queerly; and Steve said:

"It'll be fifteen or twenty minutes before the sled gets here—hadn't you better lie back and take it easy?"

"I'll sit up," Simon said. "Clootchy an' Jackson go for the sled?"

Ranier and Moody glanced at each other again and looked at their feet.

Steve coughed, and spoke reluctantly. "Why—no. Varnum went after it."

"Aw-w, tell him," Moody growled. "He'll hear it anyways."

Simon turned his head and looked at Steve. Steve's clean-cut face was grim, and at the same time strangely diffident.

He coughed again. Then his eyes flared. "I hope Jackson's in hell—where he belongs," he jerked out. "And I hope Clootchy's gone to heaven. I was coming up Number Four, looking for you, and I saw Jackson fall over backwards up there. I thought he'd slipped. And he got up and started for the edge of the brow. The way Clootchy was yelling at him, I knew something was wrong. Clootchy had his knife out and ran around the brow to head him off. He was right under Jackson, and Jackson started back across the brow when Frank and Joe came running up. They had Jackson between them and I guess he thought his best chance was with Clootchy. He jumped on him and kicked him in the face as he came down, the dirty bastard! And then he got Clootchy's knife and stuck it through his neck."

Steve came to a full stop and looked off toward the road.

Simon had forgotten about his legs. He started to get up, and the movement made him gasp. He swayed, weak and dizzy. Steve caught him and pulled his shoulders gently down.

"No," Simon told him. "I'm all right. "I——" he took a deep breath and his lips were almost as white as his teeth when he smiled. "I forgot," he said. He took another deep breath and leaned a little against McLeod.

After a little he shook his head, and muttered. "That's too bad. They were both good men; and Clootchy—whatever set them off like that?"

Nobody answered, and finally Steve said, "He knew Jackson did it on purpose. That's what he was yelling, but I didn't know what he meant till I got up to the brow. I saw you and the log just as Jackson jumped down, and I knew then that he'd rolled it on purpose."

It came to Simon suddenly who Jackson was, the lumber hog that Wash had hired; and this was his way of getting back at Simon for nearly knocking his head from his shoulders. It must be that, Simon told himself. Wash would never have hired him to do it.

"Jackson get away?" Simon asked.

He felt Steve's arms twitch. And Steve said lightly, "Why, no, he didn't. Funny about that. He started off, but somehow or other he run afoul of a cant dog." Steve's sudden laugh had a strained, unnatural sound.

Moody and Ranier glanced at each other, their eyes hard and bright, their lips thinly leering. Moody's eyes came back to Simon and Steve.

"Eyah," he said, with a sort of complacent harshness. "The hook caught him fair acrost the nose, and his whole face popped just like a rotten egg."

Simon felt Steve twitch again. Moody and Ranier looked at them and nodded, and Simon knew there wouldn't be even a coroner's inquest over Jackson's death.

Ranier turned toward the road, and said a little gustily, " 'Ere come de sled."

Simon heard the wild jingle of bells and presently one of the tote teams galloped into view. Brink and Big John Hooley were

on the sled and Neddeau was driving. The roly-poly little boss of the camp's horses swung the team in along the brow and stopped within a few feet of Simon. Brink's face was gray and pinched as he stepped down beside Simon. Simon grinned but his teeth were set behind it.

"It ain't so bad," he said. "Just mashed my shin bones some. I'll be trottin' around just like new in five-six weeks."

A small spasm twisted Brink's face. "That's bad enough," he said huskily. His hand touched Simon's shoulder lightly and he dropped to his knees beside Simon's legs. Very gently his fingers explored them.

"Go ahead an' dig in," Simon told him. "I can't feel a thing."

Brink nodded. "Mebby it's just as well." He pressed a little harder. "Feel that?"

"Eyah, I feel it, but it don't hurt."

Brink turned suddenly. "Steve, you studied doctorin', didn't ye?"

"Not enough for this," Steve said. "It'll take a surgeon—a good one."

"That's what I'm comin' at," Brink told him. "You take my team and line it for Wateegan. Telegraph Portland and Boston and get the best men they got for this kind of thing. Get 'em to Wateegan just as soon as they can make it—tell 'em they got to be there by tomorrow night to meet us when we get there."

"Hell a mile!" Simon protested. "Ol' Doc White'll fix me up all right. Just bring him right back here to camp."

Brink paid no attention to him. He stood up. "John," he said to Hooley, "you get back of Simon, and Steve, you come with me." Brink walked as far as the road with Steve and, a few moments later, Steve struck out on the run for camp. Brink came back to Simon.

"We'll get this mattress under him," he said, "and take him in."

Moody and Ranier got the mattress from the sled, and Brink took two thin boards and worked them carefully under Simon's legs.

"All right now," Brink said. "John, you slide Simon back on the mattress and I'll tend to these boards."

Very slowly, very gently, Big John lifted Simon and inched backward with him while Brink supported his legs with the boards. Simon felt only a dull grinding throb, but it made the sweat stand out all over him. He was glad when he was on the mattress. Big John took the head, and Brink the foot, and Moody and Ranier held up the middle. They eased the mattress onto the sled.

Neddeau drove out to the road and stopped at the far side of the brow. Cloutier and Jackson lay there in the snow, side by side. They were brought to the sled and covered with blankets.

"I'd like to know," Simon said, "what Jackson looks like under them whiskers."

A look of disgust twisted Brink's mouth. "Ye never will," he growled. "Time we got them whiskers off, the' wouldn't be much left but the top of his head."

Simon pushed Jackson from his mind. It didn't matter now—what was done, was done, and his mind turned to the little teamster.

"I'm sorry about Clootchy," he said. "It don't seem right. We'll have to look out for his folks, Brink."

"Eyah, I'll see about that when we take him out." Brink looked down at the blanketed figure and shook his head. "He was a good man," he muttered. Presently, he added, "Steve'll tell it outside just like it happened, only that Jackson tried to get away on Clootchy's horse and it kicked him in the face."

35

SIMON had wanted to stay in camp. But he made no further objections when he saw his legs. Between his knees and ankles they looked, he thought, like a pair of long, soggy frost-blackened squashes that had been dropped on hard ground. Two-thirds of a ton of jumping log could hit pretty hard, he concluded.

Brink and Neddau knew something about bone setting. They did what they could, but they didn't dare put on splints. In some places there didn't seem to be any bones left. They cleaned the raw flesh with a carbolic solution and then spread on an oily antiseptic that Neddeau used on his horses.

The trip out was tedious. Simon was packed in a long, narrow boxlike frame to keep him from moving when the sled tilted. Blankets were wadded about him and piled over him, but the cold in his legs seemed to reach up through his body. It was cold enough for Brink and Neddeau to take turns driving so the other could trot behind the sled and get warm. They went down the river. Sometimes there were rough places, where the snow had blown off the ice, and Simon broke out in a sweat when the runners jolted over them. Sometimes the horses trotted but mostly they walked. Their only stops were to feed and water the horses, make hot tea for themselves and once to change horses at Brevard, a tiny settlement some twenty miles above Wateegan.

They went directly to Brink's house. Doctor White was there. He and Brink's wife had turned one of the big downstairs rooms into a hospital. Its doorway was too narrow for Simon's mattress, and Brink took an ax to the frame and wall. Steve

McLeod and two other men helped carry Simon in and transfer him to the high hospital bed. They hung blankets over the mutilated doorway.

Doctor White looked at Simon's legs and went to work. He didn't say anything. His iron gray eyebrows humped together and his lean old face puckered up like a dried apple. Simon held to the edges of the mattress and watched him probe for splintered bones. Sometimes the blackness beat over him again and he'd come out of it sweating. The doctor looked at him presently.

"I guess I'll have to give you something," he said.

"No," Simon told him. "Go ahead."

Doctor White shook his head. "It's taking too much out of you. I ain't much more than started."

That night, Doctor Mathews arrived from Boston. Doctor White assured Simon there wasn't a finer surgeon in the country. "Between us," he said, "we'll fix you up."

Mathews ran his fingers over the blackened puffy calves, pressed them in, watched the dents his fingers made fill out slowly, tapped lightly along the raw and greenish-black shins. Then he straightened and took Doctor White's arm and turned toward the blanketed doorway.

"Anything ye got to say," Simon told him, "ye can say it right here."

"Eyah," Brink said. "He'll have to hear it anyways."

Mathews glanced at Doctor White, and White nodded. "Might as well."

Mathews hesitated. Then he turned back to Simon, slowly. "I—" he paused. He put his hand on Simon's arm and looked at him steadily. "There's very little circulation below your knees—ruptured blood vessels, crushed flesh—and that means gangrene. There's only one thing we can do."

"And what's that?" Simon inquired.

Mathews' eyes narrowed and their corners wrinkled. "I wish it weren't necessary—but we'll have to take them off—at the knees."

Something like a hot gas cloud whirled through Simon's head and burst between his ears. Saw off his legs? He looked at

Mathews, scarcely seeing him, and his laugh made the doctor recoil. His voice had the sound of grinding granite, when he said:

"Oh, no, ye ain't! You n'r nobody else is goin' to saw off my legs!"

Mathews recovered himself and his faint smile was sympathetic. "I think," he said slowly, "I can understand how you feel. About—" he held out his strong blunt-fingered, yet sensitive-looking hands—"as I would feel if I had to lose these. But if they were crushed as badly as your legs, I'd have to lose them—or lose my life. They'd rot off—from gangrene."

Simon looked at his legs and shook his head. "No," he said.

Mathews glanced at Doctor White. "Maybe he'll listen to you, doctor."

White rubbed his chin. "Well—I hardly know what to say. If you'll excuse me for sayin' so, I ain't so much scared of gangrene as I am about the bones and muscles. These fellers'll stand a lot of cuttin' and mashin'. I've had some mean cases. Lost some. But most of 'em pulled through."

Mathews looked at him incredulously. "You don't mean you think there's a chance to save these legs?"

"Well—" Doctor White's fingers plucked at the end of his chin and he looked at Mathews quizzically—"mebby you don't see so much of this kind of thing in the city?"

"No, we don't," Mathews admitted. "But I don't see how it's possible for flesh and bones to be crushed like this and not have to be amputated."

"It's the men," White told him. "These woodsmen ain't like city folks; they don't even stop working for a hurt that would keep a city feller in bed for a week. Now these legs look bad, and they are bad; but I think I'd wait a while and see if the circulation don't get going before we do any amputating."

"And you'll keep on waitin'," Simon said. "I'm goin' along with my legs."

"I reckon we better wait and see," White told him gently. And to Mathews, "That's my idea of it, doctor."

Mathews shoulders lifted briefly. "If you'll accept the responsibility."

"I'll guarantee it won't hurt him any to wait a few days."

"All right," Mathews said. "If you can prevent gangrene, I'll be very glad to see how you do it."

"Oh, it ain't so much what I do. It's the way nature works when a man's strong and healthy. But sometimes I've thought I've helped a little." Doctor White's forehead wrinkled and he plucked at his chin again. "What I'd like you to tell me is what you think about the bones. I've got most of them in place, but the left shank has a gap in it and I ain't sure I've got the fibulae straightened out. And there's the muscles and tendons; you know more about all those things than I could hope to learn, and I——"

"I think not," Mathews smiled. "But I'll be glad to help any way I can."

They worked together, each learning from the other. Mathews reopened Simon's legs and recovered missing sections and splinters of bone; and White, with hot and cold applications, by manipulation and a little surgery of his own, restored to some degree the circulation to Simon's feet.

Debby arrived on the second day. Brink came in with her. She caught her breath and swayed when she smelled the chloroform and antiseptics. Brink steadied her and led her to the bed.

"Simon," he said. "Here's Debby."

Simon knew she was coming, but he was still a little groggy from his last operation. "Debby?" he muttered. "Where?"

"Here, Simon," Debby told him softly, and leaned toward him.

He blinked at her a moment and then smiled. "Why—you're all eyes. And how'd ye get all that flour on your face?"

"What——?" she put her hands to her cheeks and looked at them.

Brink chuckled. "You're kind of white," he told her.

"Oh," she said, and Simon laughed and reached for her and pulled her into his arms.

"Oh, be careful!" she gasped. "You'll hurt your legs!"

"He's all right," Brink reassured her. "They got him strapped down so he can't move below his waist. I'm goin' out now. If he wants water, it's over on the table by the window, and if you

want anybody, just give that string a jerk; it's tied to a bell in the hall."

Twice in the next week, Simon had to fight. One and then the other of his legs became so inflamed that even Doctor White was silent when Mathews said they must amputate. But Simon wouldn't let them.

"I'm keepin' 'em," he said; and Debby and Brink stood by him.

Debby scarcely left the room during those days. What sleep she had was in short naps; sometimes in the rocker by Simon's bed, sometimes on the couch across the room while he slept. Brink and Helen and the doctors became anxious about her. They argued and pleaded with her to go to bed and get some rest and sleep, but she wouldn't.

"I couldn't sleep at all outside this room," she told them. "And I do get some here."

"Go out and walk for an hour or so," Mathews urged. "Walk till you're tired and I think you could sleep."

"No," she said. "I've got to stay here."

"But it isn't just yourself," he reminded her. "You're carrying a baby and if you aren't careful——"

"No," she shook her head. "If I lose this baby I can have another. But there's only one Simon."

They brought in a single bed for her and placed it foot to foot with Simon's, so they could see each other while she was resting.

The evening of the eighth day after Debby's arrival Simon dropped off in a deep sleep. She touched his forehead and found it damp and cool. She was alone with him at the time and pulled the bell cord. Either Mathews or White was always in the house. Mathews hurried in.

"Well," he exclaimed softly, when he had looked at Simon. "I guess you win." He put his arm about Debby's shoulders. "Now, little girl, you go to bed; you couldn't ask for a better Christmas present."

Debby looked blank a moment. Then a glow came into her face. "Why, it is Christmas, isn't it?" she whispered. "I—I couldn't go to sleep now!"

Two days later Doctor Mathews left for Boston. "I hadn't

expected to be away anywhere near this long," he said to Doctor White and Brink at the station. He smiled. "It seems incredible even now; but Hastings still has his legs, and he's going to keep them. He's a big man but I'm satisfied we found enough of the bones to support him when they've knit; and what we missed are so small that his system should absorb them. The only question now, I think, is whether the muscles and tendons will recover sufficiently to function. And if anybody can bring that about"—he smiled at White—"I think you're the man to do it, doctor. And watch that splendid girl; I'm afraid she's going to lose her baby."

White returned his smile. "We'll watch them both. I—uh—I was thinking, doctor, if it come handy for you to make it, that you might be able to come up again, say around April. Simon had ought to be on his feet by then and I'd like to see him have the use of 'em."

"I'd like nothing better," Mathews told him. "Suppose you let me know when you think it would be best to come. I've learned something and I'd like to see this through."

Brink turned troubled eyes on Doctor White when the train pulled out. "Look here, doc," he said. "You think the's any—any chance that Simon won't—that when he comes to try, his legs won't work?"

White shook his head and squeezed Brink's arm. "It's hard to tell. But I'm going to start work on 'em as soon as I can without hurting him too much."

"How ye mean?"

"Rubbing 'em—feel out the muscles—straighten 'em and smooth 'em out—get out the kinks. I've never seen a worse case of crushing, but maybe we can help him get them working again."

Brink had to go back to the woods in January; and the rest of that month and through February and March Doctor White and Debby worked on Simon's legs, rubbing, manipulating. Simon sweat from the pain of it when they began. Then, gradually, the treatments hurt him less. Brink came out for a few days early in March. He told Simon that things were going well in the woods and that made Simon feel better. He had begun to

move his legs a little and he showed Brink how he could lift his knees.

Day after day he lay there trying to move his feet, trying to force his toes to wiggle. But the connections seemed gone. Except that he could feel it when he touched them, his legs, from his knees down, might have been made of partly-hardened putty.

Debby worked on them every day, as Doctor White had taught her, kneading them gently, smoothing them out, rubbing them briskly. Later in March, when he found that his ankles would bear the weight of his legs without folding over, Simon took a hand at the rubbing himself. He would draw up his knees, one at a time, and slap and punch and rub and twist his calves and feet.

He began sitting on the edge of the bed, lifting his knees and letting his feet slap on the floor. One day he held to the bed and tried to stand up. He could feel his ankles wobble as his weight came on them; then they folded over. He caught himself, but it gave him a scare.

Doctor White contrived some braces for him, strong steel strips, padded and sewed to his boots; and Simon put them on one day and stood on his feet till they ached. By the end of the month he could stand for five minutes before he felt any pain. He could even take a few steps, if he held to something solid.

"I'm comin' along," he smiled at Debby; and she smiled back at him.

She had more color now; Simon and Doctor White prevailed on her to get out and walk every day; but she was still thin and the dark smudges and fine lines about her eyes hadn't entirely cleared away. Her thinness made her pregnancy more noticeable, but she seemed to carry the baby without discomfort.

On the first of April, Simon remarked, "What I need is an extra pair of legs. The snow'll be gone in a week or so now, and I aim to get outdoors."

He had some fine-grained spruce sent over from the mill and made himself a pair of sturdy crutches. He finished them the next afternoon, while Doctor White was there.

"Watch me now!" he said; and Debby laughed.

"Wait till I get Helen."

She went to the hall and called, and when Helen came the three of them stood about Simon; Doctor White and Helen on either side of him and Debby a few steps in front. Simon boosted himself up and got the crutches under his arms. They were too long, but the fact didn't convey any warning to him. He set them ahead and swung between them. At the top of their arc his momentum ceased. He felt for the floor but it wasn't there; he couldn't reach it. For a split second he hung, balanced, then went forward. His feet found the floor but not far enough ahead. The crutches pushed him and, before he could recover, he was falling. Debby tried to catch him. But his weight was too great, and her very nearness prevented him from helping himself. They went down. Simon put out his hands and managed not to fall on her. He laughed and rose to his knees. It hadn't hurt him in the least.

Debby laughed, but broke off short. The color drained from her face. She put her hands to her abdomen and gasped. Then she cried, "Oh!" and again, "Oh-h!"

Doctor White and Helen ran to her. Simon stared, suddenly weak, not knowing what to do.

"Her baby!" Helen cried. "It's coming!"

Doctor White gave Simon a push. "Get behind her!"

Simon moved; he scuttled around behind her on his hands and knees and took her in his arms.

"Not so high," White snapped at him; and he hitched himself backward till her shoulders rested on his thigh and her head on his arms. He held her and shivered. And Debby had her baby there, before him, on the floor.

His shirt was wet with sweat when it was over. Helen took the baby, and Doctor White carried Debby to her bed. Simon stayed where he was, overwhelmed, for the first time in his life, with awe.

White's voice ripped through the room. "Get some water—hot and cold!"

Without thinking what he did, Simon got to his feet and started for the door. He took several steps before he lost his balance and went down on his hands and knees. Realization came to him suddenly. He had walked!

He was getting up again when a chair bumped into him, and Helen said:

"Here, sit down and hold the baby while I get the water."

He glanced furtively at the bundle in the hollow of her arm and pulled himself into the chair. She laid the baby on his lap and hurried out. Simon scarcely dared to breathe. The baby was very still. Through a gap in the towel Simon could see part of the baby's face, but he couldn't bring himself to lift the towel and look closer. The brief glimpses he'd had of it, and the way the doctor had looked, made him feel there was something wrong. A sort of numbness held him. His only movement was when he shifted his eyes from the bundle on his lap to the bed.

Helen hurried in with two pails of water. Then she was busy with the doctor at the bed. It seemed a long time to Simon that he sat there, looking at the bed, wondering about Debby, wondering about the baby. And all that time, a growing apprehension welled up in him, colder and colder.

He heard a murmur of voices. Then Doctor White said, "Good," and repeated, more emphatically, "Good!"

Simon ran his tongue along his lips. The doctor stepped back and wiped his hands on a towel and turned to Simon with a puckered smile.

"Debby's coming along fine," he said. "She wants to see you."

Simon felt suddenly weak and limp. The doctor took the baby from him and laid it on his bed, motioned to Helen and they stood on either side of his chair. Simon boosted himself up and put his arms across their shoulders and walked to Debby.

"Here's your man," the doctor said to Debby. "And now we'll see about your boy."

So it was a boy. But that didn't mean much to Simon. Looking at Debby made him feel all choked up. Her eyes were so large and dark and deep, and her face was so white. Her lips moved faintly in a smile and her hand slipped over the covers toward him. He took it and her fingers curled about his and drew him to her. He eased himself carefully to the bed and her hands went up to his head and pulled it down to her breast.

"I'm afraid, Simon," she whispered presently.

He lifted his head so he could see her. "You—you don't feel good?"

"I'm all right." Her hand moved softly, lingeringly, over his cheek, and her voice was so low he could barely hear it. "It's the baby. I'm afraid he—isn't——" the words seemed to stick in her throat. Her hand moved across his cheek again. "I—I'm sorry," she whispered brokenly.

Simon slipped his arms about her shoulders and put his head against hers. "Never mind about the baby," he said. "I'm thinkin' about you."

Debby's arms curled about his neck as if she would never let him go. His arms and shoulders and back were cramped when he heard the doctor come into the room. He hadn't heard him go out. He sat up, and one look at the doctor's face confirmed both his and Debby's fears.

36

DOCTOR WHITE wouldn't let Debby go to the cemetery. Simon might have gone but he couldn't leave Debby, even to see their baby buried, and he stayed at home with her, sitting in one of Brink's big chairs, holding her in his arms. The chair was by a window overlooking Brink's side yard. Just beyond the window a pair of robins hopped about in the curled dry grass searching for worms among the greenish roots. Simon didn't see them. He was thinking about the baby.

If he hadn't got hurt, the baby would be alive and well. If he hadn't got hurt, Debby wouldn't have had the shock and the long strain of nursing him. If he hadn't got hurt—he gave his head a shake. What was the use in thinking about it? What was done, was done.

Debby's fingers touched his cheek. He looked down at her and smiled.

"Well," he said, "we got 'em started, anyways. And next time we get one comin' along, I'll watch out better where I put my feet." Thinking of his accident had made him think of Wash, and he added a little grimly, "I wonder what luck Wash and Lizzie'll have?"

Letters from home had told them, with other village news, that Lizzie was going to have a baby. And Web's last letter told how Lizzie, whenever he saw her, always asked how Simon was getting along.

Debby was thinking of this, when she answered, "You look as if you were sorry they're going to have a baby."

"I don't like the idea of their beatin' us out," he told her.

Then he smiled. "But we'll ketch up with 'em; and then we'll start building our house again. Or would ye rather start it this summer, anyhow?"

"Whatever you like," she said.

She sounded tired, and he told her to go to sleep. He cuddled her to him and got to thinking about Council Rock, and he wondered what was being done about this fall's election to the legislature. He'd thought about it off and on ever since Aussy's letter had come, a little over a month ago. It was the only letter Aussy had written, but he hadn't mentioned the election, and neither had Web. It made Simon feel uncomfortable, as he had told them he'd let them know. But it wasn't any easier to tell them now than it had been last fall. He concluded to wait until they did mention it, and then get out of it because of his legs.

He was sure they would be all right again in another two or three months, but that would be too late for him to do much effective talking for himself. Anybody who beat Cy Whitly, he told himself, should have been hard at work before now. He had a bigger job to do: to make muscular connection with his feet and toes, and he worked on them every day until they ached. When Doctor Mathews came up from Boston the middle of April, Simon could move his right foot up and down a full half inch, and he could wiggle his left big toe.

Mathews was full of wonder over it. "When I first saw you," he said, "I'd have staked my reputation that you'd never move your feet again. And now you're actually walking! I don't see how you do it."

Simon smiled, and Doctor White said, "If you'd ever seen him ride a log you'd know how he does it. It's knowing how to balance; and he's learned how to balance on his ankle bones instead of on his feet."

Mathews stayed two days. "There isn't a thing I can suggest," he said when he was leaving, "except to keep on with the exercises. But don't overdo them, and don't get impatient. It will be slow progress. You're doing splendidly and I see no reason why you shouldn't recover sufficiently to balance on your feet instead of on your ankles. But wait till you can do that before you try to do more. Keep to level and solid footing. If you

should fall or catch your foot you might wrench those muscles and ligaments so they'd never function again."

Ever since Doctor White had permitted Simon to have visitors, old Ed Topham and Frank Moran had been in two or three times a week to see him. Frank gave him the news of the camp brought down by the tote teams and in letters from Brink; and Ed, who was enlivening his retirement with politics, as well as keeping up his former business contacts, kept him up to date on those affairs.

Ed was sure that Jed Sawyer would take up his option on the railroad stock before it expired on the first of May; and this and Doctor Mathews' warning about his legs made Simon doubt there would be any more woods work for himself and Brink—at least for another year or two. It troubled him less than he'd thought it would, for now he was thinking more about Debby than about himself and the woods.

Every day, after he had done his exercises, he cuddled her on his lap and, if visitors didn't come, would hold her till suppertime, sitting in Brink's big chair, sometimes talking, sometimes in long silences that drew them ever closer together.

Shortly after Doctor Mathews left, it came to Simon that he could never leave Debby again, even to go into the woods. He wondered how he had ever been able to leave her, and argued with himself that the only reason he had was because of his duty to Brink and his job. It reconciled him a little to what had happened, and things were shaping up in a way to help reconcile him more.

He hated the thought of ending his long association with Brink; but it had to come. Sawyer's purchase of the railroad stock would automatically put them out of business; but they could visit each other and keep up their friendship, all four of them. Simon took comfort in the thought that it would work out the same way it had with Web and himself.

Sitting there in Brink's big chair in the afternoons with Debby on his lap, he got to wondering what he could do with himself. He couldn't just putter around at home, making ax handles and other odds and ends. He'd have to have something to occupy him and keep his mind busy. He could rebuild their house right away,

but that wouldn't be enough; the job wouldn't last very long.

He searched his mind for something to do; something of importance. It had to be important, as he couldn't use his legs any longer as an excuse to keep from running for the legislature. He could stay on his feet for an hour now without being overly tired and he could walk with scarcely any limp on level going. No matter if the time was short, Aussy and Web and the others might still come down on him to run, and the very idea was abhorrent to him.

His recovery gave him a double incentive to find something to do and the last week in April he decided to talk it over with Debby. He told her about Jed Sawyer and how things stood in regard to the woods and lastly he finally got it out that he couldn't leave her any more. She gave him a kiss and then smiled at him and patted his cheek.

"You'd better not make any promises," she said. "When your legs are good and strong again you won't want any promises tying you down—and I won't let you make any. But you can't just sit around in the meantime; you'll have to find something to do, and going into the legislature might be just the thing. At least, it would be something different, and I think a winter in Augusta might be good for us both."

Again Simon had that cornered feeling. Only now it was worse. He hadn't dreamed that Debby would be in favor of his trying the legislature, and he looked at her in dismay.

She gave a sympathetic little laugh. "You poor boy," she said. "But why don't you think you'd like it?"

"I'd feel like a pussy willow!" he told her.

She laughed again and then grew serious. She looked as if she were trying to think of something, and presently her face brightened.

"You don't think Mr. Blaine's a pussy willow, do you?"

Simon gave her a half-smile. "He's diff'rent. He's a big man."

"Yes, he is a big man—one of the biggest in the country. But how do you suppose he got to where he is?"

"Well, he's got a good education, and he's been at it a long time."

"But he had to make a start, didn't he? And I guess you've got as good an education as he had when he was your age—about people and things, anyhow."

Simon shook his head. "About people, mebby; but all I know is about the woods. What could I do about law-makin' when I don't know the first thing about law? It takes a feller that's learned the law to do that."

"But you could study it—I mean, you could read enough to know what it was about. And anyhow, I don't think a man needs to know that so much as he needs to have commonsense. I've heard Mr. Adams—you remember him—where I board at Fairview? Well, he's a conductor on the railroad and he sees a lot of people, and I've heard him say that what we need is less law and more sense."

Simon smiled. "Eyah, that's what Aussy says. But the trouble is that I ain't got that kind of sense."

"Oh, fiddle!" Debby cried. "You've got better sense than anybody I know! Good commonsense—and you know what's right and what's wrong. Anybody can hire a lawyer to make out a paper for him, but it takes a lot of good sense to know what kind of a paper to make out. That's why they want you to run for the legislature—because they know you'd know whether a thing was right or wrong—if it was what the people needed and not just something the railroads or trusts or somebody like that wanted. And they want you because they know they'd pay attention to you in Augusta."

Simon's eyes twinkled. "Sounds like Aussy an' Web's been talkin' to ye."

"Yes, they have," she said defiantly. "They talked to me several times last fall. But what if they did? It's what I think, and it's what a lot of other people think." Debby put her hands on his shoulders, and said with quiet conviction: "Simon, if you put your mind to it, you could be as big a man as Mr. Blaine."

Simon grunted. "Eyah, I could likely outweigh him on the hay scales. But it ain't that that counts, and I—well, I just don't want any part of it."

"How do you know you wouldn't like it? You had a good time going around talking for Web, and everybody you talked

to paid good attention to you. I'm just trying to help you find something you'd like and that would keep you busy, and I do think that if you went into the legislature you'd find it as interesting as anything you could do."

Simon looked at her wryly. What she'd said was more than partly true. But spending the winter in Augusta—he shook his head and looked out the window.

Presently Debby reminded him gently, "You asked me to help you find something to do."

He gave a little sigh and nodded.

"Well, what else is there—I mean, can you think of anything else?"

He didn't answer, and she went on, "You're used to staying at home in the summer, but after you've been there a while in the winter, without anything to do, you'd get so restless you wouldn't be able to live with yourself."

Simon glanced at her and then looked out the window and frowned. She was a good deal more than partly right, there. He hadn't thought of it in just that way, but twiddling his thumbs in the village all winter—he saw himself going down to the store, on up to Web's, over to Aussy's and the Grants', up to Freem's, down to the factory and tannery to hang around like a homeless pup. Even Augusta would have more to offer than that. At least he could keep busy finding out what was going on. He turned back to Debby.

"What about you?" he asked. "What could you do down to Augusta while I was messin' around?"

She smiled. "Oh, lots of things. I'd be your assistant, look after things for you and write the letters you didn't want to bother with; and I'd meet the wives of other men in the legislature and—oh," she laughed, "I could keep so busy we might have to eat our meals at a restaurant!"

Simon very nearly grinned. "Oh, no, ye wouldn't. I'd see to that. I don't aim to eat hash-house grub—not when I can get your cookin'."

Debby laughed and flushed a little. "You really like my cooking?"

"If you like to cook it half as well as I like to eat it, you'd never let anybody else do it for ye."

"All right then, we'll find a place—a nice little place where we can live just as we do at home."

Simon gave her an amused look. "Wait a minute now—I ain't elected yet, and the's a right good chance that I won't be."

"But—but why?" Debby asked, startled.

"Too late. Aussy figured they'd have to get goin' around the first of the year to beat out Cy Whitly."

She laughed. "Oh, fiddle! You could get elected if you didn't start talking till August. I know better than you do what the folks at home think about you."

"We'll see about it. I'll write Web and see what he says."

Simon wrote that evening and mailed the letter so it would go on the early-morning stage. He told Web he'd run against Whitly if they still wanted him, and if they thought he had a chance; but that he had to see Brink before he left Wateegan, and that wouldn't be till some time in June, after Brink had come down with the drive.

Web's answer came by return mail.

Simon grunted. "He didn't waste much time, did he?"

He read the letter aloud to Debby and she clapped her hands and laughed.

"I knew it!" she cried. "Everybody knows you can beat Cyrus Whitly—I'll bet you could beat him if you didn't talk at all—just let folks know that you were running!"

Simon had to laugh. "Eyah, that's what they said about Web, and Cy beat him after we'd both talked our heads off."

"He won't beat you," Debby declared. "Oh, I hope mud-time gets over early—I'll be so glad to see them I can hardly wait!"

"Susan and me," Web had written, "will drive over as soon as the frost is out of the ground and the roads have dried up fit for traveling. We'll fix up your papers and figure what to do till you get here. But how about writing Brink about it? Then you could come home with us, and Brink could come over and see you here. Cy's going to get mighty busy when he hears you're running and if you wait for Brink he'll have a good month's start on you. Think it over."

Simon did think it over. But the ice had gone out of the lower river and he wasn't sure that he could get a letter up to Brink. He was about to send down to Frank Moran to find out if any

more supplies were going upriver, when Ed Topham came to see him. Ed's thin wrinkled face seemed even more wrinkled, as if he'd eaten something sour.

"Looks like we'd guessed wrong about Jed Sawyer," he said. "He's let his option go. Cal'late he figured it would lose him money buying into the railroad."

Simon's first reaction was a sort of breathless hope; now, Brink would buy the Henderson tract and they could go on with their logging! Then he remembered Debby and his legs, and apprehension took hold of him. Even if his legs were strong enough for the woods by fall, he couldn't leave Debby again. And, besides, he had committed himself to Web.

What, he asked himself, could he say to Brink? Certainly he couldn't write to him about it now. He'd have to wait till Brink came down-river. He saw Ed watching him with puzzled uncertainty, and then Ed said:

"Ye don't look like ye like it so well."

Simon smiled wryly. "No. I been figurin' we was through in the woods, and I—I don't know what to do, Ed."

"What's the trouble?" Ed inquired.

"Well—it's like this," Simon said, and went on to tell Ed all about it.

Ed's sour look began to disappear as he listened, and he laughed when Simon had finished.

"It looks," he said, "like we both been worried half sick over nothing. Brink wrote me to come over and see what I could do to let ye down easy. That was last week, afore the ice went out, and I been putting it off. I didn't like the job, but I had to come around today or ye'd have heard about it from somebody else."

"Heard about what?" Simon asked.

Ed gave him a teasing look. "Why, Brink got to figuring, and it come to this: he'd have to stop loggin', anyhow, if Jed bought into the railroad and raised the rates on him, and he didn't care about going on alone if Jed didn't buy into it. He's been writing Doc White and the doc told him your legs wouldn't be any good in the woods for another year or two, and maybe not then, and by that time, Brink figured, he'd be ready to quit for good, anyhow. He's spent over forty years in the woods and it was time

he got out, if he was ever going to. And he'd got around to feeling like you do—about your wives, I mean—and he wanted to do some traveling around the country with Helen.

"The trouble was he hated to go back on Joe Henderson. He knew Joe wanted to sell his timber and get into the railroad." Ed's face cracked with a grin. "So he wrote to Joe that he'd turn his timber option over to Sawyer if Sawyer would turn over his railroad option to Joe."

"And that's what they did?"

"That's what they did. Joe told Sawyer he'd guar'ntee fair lumber rates if Sawyer would guar'ntee to feed the railroad forty million of new logs every year. So now Joe and Trueman Libby own the railroad stock, and Jed owns the timber."

Simon let go a sigh, partly relief, partly resignation. "Frank sending anybody upriver soon?" he asked.

"Eyah, the supply bateaux are going up in a couple of days. The river's open to the Jill Poke and they'll meet the tote teams there."

Simon wrote two letters: a short one to Web saying that he and Debby would go home with them in May, and a long one to Brink telling him what he was going to do and that he and Debby would be expecting him and Helen in Council Rock as early in June as they could make it.

Mud-time dragged along for Simon and Debby but actually the roads dried up that spring earlier than they had for years. May was little more than a week old when Web and Susan arrived. They stayed two days, and then took Simon and Debby home. As they were leaving, Simon said to Helen:

"Now remember, we'll be lookin' for ye around the last of June, so don't keep us waitin' too long."

"Yes," Debby said. "You've been so good to us that we can never make it up; so we won't try. We'll just——" she blinked and swallowed—"I know you'll like it over there and we'll have the grandest time."

Helen's eyes were as damp as Debby's. "We'll be there," she promised.

The sun wasn't up when Web clucked to the horses, and it was a great red ball in the western sky when they came out of the

woods that ringed the valley of Council Rock. Simon turned to Debby where she sat on the back seat with Susan.

"Looks kind of good, don't it?" he smiled.

"It's home," Debby answered, and her eyes misted.

They came to the first house with its queer small gables and sagging stoop. All that had held it together was the shingling job its last tenant had done over thirty years ago, and the shingles now were beginning to go.

"That place is gettin' to be a worse eyesore than ever," Simon remarked. "Seems as though the town would tear it down."

Web shrugged. "Why bother with it? And, besides, I don't cal'late ye could get anybody t' get that close to it."

Simon vaguely recalled the stories about the place; accidents to tenant after tenant, until the last one had fallen from the newly shingled roof and killed himself, and since then nobody would live on the place.

"Funny how a place can get a bad name like that," Simon said. "A feller could live there as long as he could anywhere, if he didn't get careless."

Web gave him an amused look. "Ye figurin' t' try it?"

"Not me," Simon smiled. "I'll leave that to somebody else."

They passed the Thurston place. Simon looked it over but said nothing. His eyes went ahead to Aussy's and then to the Grants' and the Davenports' and Greggs', and finally to the Dixon place facing them at the turn. He felt a warm glow as Web drove into the dooryard.

"Well, here ye be," Web said. "I think ye'll find everything ye need—from firewood t' Epsom salts." He chuckled and whacked Simon on the shoulder. "Ye old lumber hog! It sure is good t' see ye back here again."

He handed the lines back to Susan and got down. Simon climbed out clumsily. He held to the seat and helped Debby out. She dropped lightly down and smiled at him. He went to the back of the wagon and flipped his turkey over his shoulder. Web took Debby's things and went ahead and unlocked the door. Simon rested a hand on Debby's shoulder and walked to the house. The uneven ground bothered him less than he had thought it would. They followed Web inside, through the

kitchen to the sitting room. Web pushed out Simon's big chair. Simon smiled. After riding all day he didn't feel like sitting down, but he did, and stretched out in the chair.

"Home again," Web rumbled with deep satisfaction. "Well, we'll be back after supper—before the others get here." He gave Simon's head a playful push and went out to his wagon and drove off.

37

The next morning, while Debby was getting breakfast, Simon went out to the woodshed. He found that he could swing his ax and not lose his balance, but he couldn't keep it up very long. It made his legs ache. He was tempted to persist at it and see what would happen but concluded he'd better follow the doctor's advice and not try to do too much.

He wanted to feel surer about his legs before he started out to undo some of the talk that Cyrus Whitley had been making. Whitly was telling his constituents that they'd better do considerable thinking before they voted for a man who had no legal training and was a cripple as well. So every morning, Simon split wood and walked. Measured from day to day he couldn't see much progress. But by the end of the week he could split enough wood to last two or three days and could walk to the store without stopping or feeling tired.

There had been no rain in the valley that spring. All the water the ground had received had come from the melting snow in April, and the last week in May, when Simon started out on his campaign, the farmers were already beginning to worry. Their crops were all planted and their cattle were in the pastures, but the ground was already getting dry and the grass was losing its lush green look.

When the cultivated crops broke through the ground, Simon fell back on his own experience and advised extra hoeing and cultivation wherever possible, to break up the clods and help conserve the moisture. Where farmers were skeptical he'd take a hoe and work along a row of corn or potatoes. A few days

later, the farmer was usually willing to admit that it did make a difference. This helped for a while but by the middle of June hoeing only stirred up the dust.

Wallace and Ting, digging for worms to go fishing, could find none even under the heaviest sod. Web showed Simon where they had dug down for two feet, and the dirt at the bottom, when Simon squeezed it, was too dry to stick together. Potatoes and corn, pasture grass and hay turned a yellowish green and stopped growing. Brooks and springs and wells were drying up and some people were already hauling water.

What made it worse was the rain that fell to the east and west of the valley. Black clouds would come up in the north, thunder would roll and lightning would flash. Rain seemed to be coming at last. But the storm always split to the north of Jessup's Mills, part of it going down the east branch to Brent's Falls and the rest going down through Ricker's Falls on the western side of the divide. Rain fell to the north and east and west, plenty of rain, but none fell in the valley that summer.

Simon had seen droughts before but never like this. Corn in low places grew as high as two feet, and then withered up. It was the same with potatoes and garden crops. People who had the time and the water kept small gardens growing. But most people were too busy hauling water for their stock to have either time or water for their gardens. Simon helped to put in a road to the stream between his house and Otis Wick's, and all day long an almost continuous procession of teams passed along it, going down to the stream with barrels rattling and bouncing, and coming back up the slope with horses and oxen straining and sweating, and water splashing out from under the barrel covers.

One noon when Simon was at home, Roger Benton stopped out in front to breathe his horses. He shook his head at Simon, and said:

"By God, I don't know what we're a-comin' to. Seems as though I ain't done a thing but haul water, haul water, haul water all my life. The cows are dryin' up—I'm bringin' quarts t' the fact'ry where I used t' bring gallons; the potatoes and corn won't even make seed and the' ain't enough in the garden for

one good dinner. I cal'late we can do without greens and eat veal an' pork an' lamb an' chickens till we grow hair or feathers, but the cattle can't get along without grass an' water and if we don't get rain mighty quick, I just don't know what'll happen to 'em this fall and winter."

"It ain't as bad as it might be," Simon told him. "We can still get plenty of hay and grain from the outside."

Roger gave him a flat-lipped narrow-eyed smile. "Eyah, if we could find a way t' pay for it. But where's the money comin' from? No potatoes—no starch—and hardly enough milk for cheese and butter t' keep us in salt an' flour. And now my pasture's dryin' up. I either——" Roger stopped and shook his head. "I cal'late it don't pay t' talk about it."

He started his horses and moved on up the hill. Simon let go a deep breath and got two pails from the back entry and went down to the stream. All afternoon he dipped water and talked, and between wagons he sat on the bank thinking. The election had left his mind entirely, buried under the farmers' troubles. There wasn't a better farmer or more level-headed man in the valley than Roger Benton, and what he had said, and left unsaid, brought home to Simon the seriousness of the situation to those who depended wholly on their crops and milk for the cash to keep them going.

Hazily, Simon recalled another such catastrophe to the valley. The potato crop had failed. It was long ago, when potatoes were the only cash crop. He couldn't have been more than seven or eight at the time but he remembered how bare Lish Morrison's shelves had been, and dimly recalled that the reason for it was that nobody had any money. Temp, he remembered, had put the valley on its feet again by converting the starch factory to the making of cheese. But now there didn't seem to be anything to turn to.

It was almost too late now for rain to do much good. While it would help the pastures, it couldn't help the crops, and the hay was thin and dry and yellow and had already gone to seed. Some farmers were cutting their hay now, and feeding it to supplement their pasturage, hay that was cutting less than half its normal yield and that they would need for winter feed.

If rain didn't come, the farmers would have to use most of their hay to bring their cattle through the summer; and in any event, hay and grain would have to be brought in from outside. The only alternative was the sale of the larger part of the cattle, and that meant that the creamery and cheese factory would go out of business, not temporarily but until the farmers could replace their cows, which might take years. It meant that the valley would drop from its place among prosperous communities; drop to a level of stricken farms and stricken people.

This was the picture Simon saw, and he sat on the bank long after the last teams had gone, thinking about it, wondering what could be done. Debby called to him that supper was ready and he picked up his pails and walked slowly to the house. Debby had been over to her mother's that afternoon and she had the bright suppressed look of a bearer of news. Simon didn't notice it until he'd washed and sat down at the table. Then he said:

"Looks like ye been hearin' something."

Debby nodded and her eyes snapped. "That Parker!" she exclaimed, and she spoke with a relish. "He's finally had a row with Wash, and Wash has run him off the place!"

"Run him off?" Simon was incredulous.

Debby nodded again, vigorously, and her teeth gleamed in a grim little smile of satisfaction. "Told him to pack up and clear out—and stay out! Pa told me about it. He'd been up to the spring in the pasture to see if he could do anything to get more water. Wash and Parker came over to help him dig it out, but that didn't do any good. There was hardly enough water for Pa's cattle, and Wash said the pool it used to keep full down in his pasture was just about dry. Pa offered to take down the fence so Wash's cattle could get to the spring, but Wash said no, there wasn't any use in both of them having to haul water and, as the spring was Pa's, he should use all of it. Wash said that now there wasn't any hoeing or cultivating to do, hauling water would be a good job for Parker."

Debby smiled again and her eyes snapped. "Parker said he'd do his share, but he'd be—be damned if he'd do it alone. Pa said they had it back and forth till Wash got mad; and then Parker got mad, and Wash told him to pack up and get out,

and Parker said nothing would suit him better, and he went home. Pa said he'd never seen them look like that or act like that before, and he guessed they must have been working up to it for some time. Anyhow, Parker's gone! And where do you suppose he's gone? The 'haunts'—the old gabled house!"

Simon smiled, still incredulous.

"Well, he's there," Debby declared. "Henry saw him there when he came along with the mail, and he had the doors and windows open."

Simon laughed softly.

"What do you suppose will happen to him?" Debby asked.

"That's just what I was wonderin'. Funny how ye can get to believin' things like that. But I reckon all that can happen to him is goin' kind of hungry and bein' mighty uncomfortable in an empty house."

Debby gave a little shiver and wrinkled her nose. "It isn't going to be so nice for Wash and Lizzie, though. She was going to have her baby at home, but now that Wash will have to haul water I guess she'll have to go up to her ma's. She couldn't stay there alone with a new baby."

"Mebby her ma'll come down here," Simon suggested.

Debby looked doubtful. "There's five men to feed up there, and only Wash down here."

"I cal'late they'll figure it out," Simon said. He went on eating absently. Then he shook his head. "This is the first time I ever heard of that spring even startin' to dry up. We always had plenty of water from it down in our pasture pool. Ye say that's all gone?"

Debby nodded. "Or it will be in a day or two—the brook's dry as powder, Pa says."

"Looks like we got to figure up something," Simon said slowly. "We got to get money comin' into the town—enough to buy hay and grain for the winter and to keep folks goin', or they'll have to sell off most of their stock."

"Is it as bad as that?" Debby looked at him anxiously.

"It'll be worse than that if we can't figure up something."

"Couldn't you lend them the money?"

Simon's face brightened. " 'Y Godfrey," he said. "Mebby I could." A far-off look came into his eyes and he sat there thinking. Presently he said, "I guess I'll go after Web and go over and talk to Aussy about it."

"If you can wait till I do the dishes," Debby said, "I'll go with you."

He filled his pipe and smoked while she washed the dishes and put them away. Then they walked down through the village. Simon looked at the stream and the sawmill dam as they crossed the bridge. The dam leaked badly and there were more than trickles coming through the mill and box-shop wheelraces.

"We're losin' too much water," Simon remarked. "Otis'll have to nail up his flumes and dump some gravel against the dam."

They walked on up to Web's and found him and Susan and the boys still at supper. Simon waited for Web to finish and they went over to Aussy's.

He and Web seemed surprised when Simon told them of Debby's suggestion.

"It'll take right smart of money," Aussy said. "Ye figured any on it?"

"Not too close," Simon answered. "But I figure five thousand ought to about cover it."

"Good Godfrey," Web exclaimed. "I should hope it would!"

"It would help, anyways," Aussy said. "Ye got that much t' spare?"

Simon's eyes twinkled. "I could take that out and still have enough for Debby and me to live right well on the int'rest."

Aussy and Web looked still more surprised.

"For God's sake," Web said. "How'd ye get all that?"

Simon's smile widened. "Why, I been makin' right good money from the start, and I didn't have much to spend it on. I got five thousand up to Fairview and some better than twenty more down to Wateegan."

Aussy's eye rounded, and Web muttered softly, "Good Godfrey Peter!"

Then Aussy grunted and turned to Web. "It looks," he said

dryly, "like we'd ought t' go into the loggin' business." His hand came up to his chin, as if he'd suddenly thought of something, and he rumbled, "Now that's something."

Web looked at him a moment, and asked, "What is?"

"Why—I was just thinkin'," Aussy told him. "Lendin' money," he said to Simon, "on a big scale like that is kind of bad business. I cal'late the's quite a few that wouldn't take it anyhow, and——"

"I think they would," Simon broke in. "I wa'n't figurin' just to lend it; I was figurin' to buy what stock they'd have to sell anyhow, but let them keep it and pay me int'rest, what they could, till they could buy the stock back."

Aussy nodded and stroked his chin. "Well," he admitted, "that would be diff'rent. But I still think it would be a lot better if ye could hire 'em at something, so they wouldn't have to sell their stock like that."

"Eyah," Simon agreed. "That would be better—I been tryin' all afternoon to think of some kind of work we could do, but the' just ain't anything."

Aussy smiled and narrowed his eyes. "Mebby not. But talkin' about makin' money loggin' put me in mind of something. The's enough timber up the stream t' keep the whole village goin' for two-three years—if we could get it."

Simon and Web glanced at each other, and Aussy went on. "I know what you're thinkin', and I know Wash turned down Ormond Story on hemlock bark this spring, but I got an idee that he'd sell the whole of it if he got a fair price."

"A fair price for it," Simon said, "would take more than I got, and the' wouldn't be any money left to pay for the cuttin'."

Aussy grunted. "The' must be more than I thought."

"The's plenty," Simon said. "Over two thousand acres—wouldn't ye say, Web?"

"All of that," Web answered.

"Eyah," Aussy said. "I remember now; Temp told me when he bought it that he had an even two thousand acres in growin' stuff, and a few hundred acres more in bogs and meadows that went with it."

"I ain't seen it in over ten years," Simon said, "except that

night when we was up there lookin' for the boys. It's good stuff—just thick enough to run it up tall, and ten years ago it would average around eighteen to twenty inches on the stump. Figure that up and it'll come close to thirty-five or forty million feet."

"And then some," Web said.

Aussy grunted again and stroked his chin. "Well, you let me think about it. Wash ain't a bad feller and mebby I can figure a way t' go at him. The' ain't any hurry, anyways."

"No," Simon said. Then half to himself, "But it ought to stay wet enough around Spring Brook in the swamp to keep the hemlock peelin' good till August."

"But that ain't Wash's," Web reminded him. "It's Otis Wick's."

Simon just looked at him.

" 'Y gorry!" Web exclaimed. "Ye mean——?"

"I sure ain't figurin' to do any business with Wash," Simon told him.

" 'Y gorry, now that's——!" Web paused again. "No, that's no good either. We'll be hauling water and hayin' from sunup t' dark till August, and after."

Simon had overlooked that, and he nodded. "That's right. No use figurin' on anything till fall. But if Otis will sell it, we could fix up the dam and put in a new wheel while the stream's low."

Web looked doubtful. "Hold on a minute. Otis might sell his timber—he could likely buy enough around t' keep him whittlin'. But what would he do if he sold the mill?"

"I wa'n't figurin' to buy the mill," Simon told him. "I'd fix it up for the use of it and turn it back to him when we're through. And some day, when Wash gets ready to cut his stuff, Otis'll have something to saw it with."

"How much stuff," Aussy wanted to know, "has Otis got up there?"

"Why—" Web glanced at Simon—"around three-four million, would ye say?"

"What ye talkin' about," Simon exclaimed. "That ain't the half of it!"

Web smiled faintly. "Ye seen it lately?"

"No, but——"

"I guess you're figurin' on what it used t' be," Web said. "But he's been cuttin' around three-four hundred thousand a year, and if the's over four million left I'll eat it."

Simon frowned. "It don't seem possible. Why—" he did some mental arithmetic—"that wouldn't come to two months' work for a hundred men—it wouldn't make 'em fifty dollars apiece!"

"It would take 'em longer than that," Web said. "They'd have their chores t' do and they wouldn't work as fast as your crews. But even fifty dollars ain't t' be sneezed at—not in times like these."

"It wouldn't buy the hay, let alone the grain they'd need," Simon said. A look of surprise came over his face. "Gorry, I hadn't figured it that way. Why, it'll take nearer ten thousand dollars to see them through the winter!"

Aussy said dryly, "Nearer twelve. We do around eight at the fact'ry."

It was more, much more, than Simon had thought. "Well," he said finally, "what can we do about it?"

"I cal'late we better do some thinkin'," Aussy answered. "Back around '67 or '68 we had a time about like this, when the potato crops failed, and Temp got us out of it. He done it by thinkin', and I'd give a good deal if he was here right now."

"Eyah," Simon said. "He'd let us cut his timber, and pay him back when we could. But Wash——" Simon's eyes narrowed and he shook his head.

After breakfast the next morning, Simon took his pails down to the stream. He forced himself to be cheerful and told the men and women who came for water that rain or something would be sure to come in time to help them out. Most of them drove off feeling better and that, Simon felt, was worth a good deal. The wagons stopped coming when noon approached, and he was about ready to go up for dinner when he saw Wash coming with a wagon full of barrels.

It was too late to go without Wash seeing him, and he shrugged and stayed where he was. He was sitting by some

bushes in the shade of a small elm, and Wash, on the other side of the oxen, didn't see him. Wash came down to the cut in the bank, swung the oxen and backed the wagon into the water. He dropped his goad-stick into the wagon and got out his pails, came down the bank and saw Simon.

He stopped, and they looked at each other.

Simon's mouth twitched. "I cal'late your stock is just as thirsty as anybody else's," he said, and stood up with his pails. "Get up in the wagon and we'll fill your barr'ls—I been dippin' for everybody all morning."

"Much obliged," Wash said slowly. He glanced at the wagon and back at Simon. "I'll water the steers first," he added, and went to the stream and filled his pails and carried them back to the oxen. He gave them two pails each and then got up in the wagon.

Simon dipped and passed up the pails and Wash emptied them in the barrels. Neither spoke until the barrels were full, and then Wash said, "That's plenty." He covered the barrels and got down and looked at Simon.

"I'm much obliged," he said again in the same slow voice. "It ain't so easy to fill barr'ls by dippin', and I—" he hesitated—"I been thinkin', if ye care to have it, I got a pump with a twelve-foot riser that would set up out in the water right handy—rig up a platform for folks to stand on and pump the water right into their barr'ls through a spout."

Simon felt a little sheepish. " 'Y gorry," he said. "I guess ye've hit it. I dunno why I never thought of that."

"I'll bring the pump down after dinner," Wash said. "I'd help ye rig it but I'm kind of short-handed."

"Eyah, so I heard."

A smoky look came into Wash's eyes. He nodded shortly and went to the oxen. "W-hysh," he said sharply. "W-hysh!" And the oxen leaned forward into their yokes and started up the slope.

38

After dinner Simon went down to Otis Wick's and told him about the pump. Otis thought it was a good idea and they went out to the barn and harnessed his big team. They drove down to the mill yard and selected some four-by-four timbers, some planks and two long square-edged boards for the trough. Otis got a saw, hammer and nails, a long heavy crowbar, a sixteen-pound maul and an ax. They drove back and down to the stream. Otis backed the wagon into the water and waded out with the crowbar. In three feet of water he began to work holes in the gravelly bottom for the four-by-fours. Simon pointed them with the ax on the bank.

When the holes were finished, Simon stood in the wagon bed with the maul and drove the timbers into the gravel while Otis held them straight. They were building a platform around the four timbers when Wash drove down with the pump.

"If the riser's too long, cut it off," he said, and drove off as if he were in a hurry.

Simon and Otis finished the platform and hung the pump. They tried it and found it needed new leathers for the valve and plunger. Otis went to the box shop and cut the leathers from a hide and they put them on. Water gushed from the pump when they tried it again, and they nailed the boards together in a V-bottom trough and hung it to the pump spout and one of the uprights. It was ready for use when the first wagon came after dinner. It was Roger Benton's, and he grinned when he saw the pump.

"Well," he said, "that'll save some time an' backs!"

"Ought to," Simon said. "It was Wash's idea—he brought the pump, and it works good."

Roger's eyebrows went up. "Well, I'll be dog-gone," he said.

He waited for Otis to move his team out of the way and then backed his wagon till it was under the trough. He climbed up and dropped the trough over a barrel and Simon began to pump. The barrel filled rapidly and Roger shifted the trough to another barrel and came to the platform and took the pump himself. They spelled each other till the barrels were filled, and another wagon took Roger's place.

Three more wagons had come and gone when Simon heard hoofbeats on the bridge and saw Wash with Lizzie's mother in the wagon beside him. Lizzie's time must be getting close, he thought. Late in the afternoon he went to the store for the mail. Lish handed him a letter from Brink, and Simon took it out on the steps and read it.

Brink was busy cleaning up his business in preparation to retiring. It would take him another two or three weeks, he thought, but he'd be over sometime in July and spend the rest of the summer. Simon smiled and put the letter in his pocket and started home to read it to Debby. Crossing the bridge he heard a horse running. It was coming up the Falls road. Simon hurried, thinking it was a runaway that might be stopped at the turn. Before he was halfway there the horse flashed into view in front of the Davenport buildings. It was hitched to a wagon, and Wash was in the seat.

Wash pulled up a little as he came to the turn but the wagon skidded, almost overturning, and swinging so wide that Simon had barely time to avoid being sideswiped. Wash's face was pale and set. He gave no sign of having seen Simon. His eyes were on the road and horse and he got the wagon straightened out and went racing across the bridge.

Simon stopped and watched him; saw him pull the horse to a sliding stop in front of Doctor Luce's, and faintly heard his frantic call:

"Freem! Oh, Freem!"

Wash backed his wagon into the Luce's dooryard, and a moment later the doctor came out, hatless and coatless, but carrying

his long black bag. The horse shot out of the dooryard and came pounding back along the road. Simon waited well back from the road and the horse passed him on the run. The doctor's long white hair streamed back, but his back was straight and his eyes serene, and he smiled at Simon and lifted his hand. Simon waved back at him, and then the wagon skidded back around the turn, straightened out again and disappeared down the road in swirls of dust.

Simon walked on home. "Well," he said to Debby, "it looks like Lizzie was about to have her baby. Wash just went after Freem on the run, and he brought Lizzie's ma down a couple of hours or so ago."

"Oh," Debby said, and her voice was soft and low with concern, "I hope she doesn't have any trouble."

Simon guessed what she was thinking about, and opened his arms. She ran into them and he smiled down at her and stroked her head.

"Now don't ye get to feeling like that," he told her. "As long as I got you, I ain't askin' for anything more—and I hope ye can feel the same about me."

"Oh, I do, Simon," she cried. "I do!" Then her eyes searched his. "Did Doctor White tell you anything—about me?" she asked.

"Why—he just said he wa'n't sure that ye could ever have any more babies."

A pinched look came into Debby's face. "He promised he wouldn't tell you," she whispered.

He smiled and stroked her head. "Well, I ain't worryin' about it," he said.

Her chin trembled and she pressed her face against him. After a little she gave a long sigh and straightened up and put her hands to her hair. There were still tears in her eyes, but she said brightly:

"You must be hungry after all you've done today. I'll go get supper."

A gust of wind came through the west windows while they were at supper. It settled to a steady breeze, cool and refreshing. Simon and Debby filled their lungs with it, and he said:

"If it would just back around to the south a little we might get some rain." He went to the window, but there wasn't a cloud in sight."

Shortly after sundown Web and Susan and the boys came in.

"Nice wind," Web said. "Makes ye feel good." He had been over to Jessup's Mills that afternoon and, from his expression, Simon knew it was more than the breeze that made Web feel good.

"What's on your mind?" he inquired.

Web let out a rumbling chuckle. "You're the dangdest feller," he said. He turned to Debby. "Ye ever notice how he always knows when folks have something on their minds? Seems as though he could almost tell what they're thinkin' about, but—" he turned back to Simon and grinned—"I bet ye can't tell what I found out this afternoon."

Simon's smile was almost a grin. "I wouldn't try," he said.

"Well—" Web hesitated, teasingly—"I found out quite a lot. They ain't any better off for water than we are. Them deep wells on top of Crockett Hill are dry and they're haulin' water—from the Maxwell's on—from the Porcupine. Well," Web chuckled again, "when I come by Cy Whitly's he was out in the yard, settin' in the shade an' lookin' mean. I stopped and asked him why he wa'n't out gettin' votes, and he like t' took my head off."

" 'Votes!' he hollered. 'Who the hell wants t' think about who he's votin' for when he's tryin' t' keep his folks an' stock alive?'

"I asked him why he wa'n't out tryin t' help 'em some way, and he looked like he was goin' t' bust. 'I've worked an' sweat for this district all I'm goin' to,' he says. 'And ye can tell Simon Hastings if he wants my job he's dam' good an' welcome to it!' "

"Oh," Debby cried, and glanced at Simon.

He smiled skeptically. "It don't mean a thing," he told her.

"Don't it?" Web grinned. "Well, if you'd been along with me you'd think diff'rent. Fellers that's voted for him regular over there told me they're through with him; said he wa'n't nothin' but a bag of wind and they was goin' t' vote for somebody that knew what they needed—somebody that's been helpin' out—and that somebody, they said, was a feller named Simon Hastings."

"Huh," Simon said; and Debby and Susan laughed, and the boys whooped.

Simon couldn't help feeling pleased but he was still quite skeptical.

The back-entry door opened suddenly and Aussy came in. He looked even more pleased about something than Web had. "Well," he said, "it looks like things was shaping up. Lizzie's had her baby, and it's a boy. Idy just come home from there and she says Wash is proud enough t' bust."

"Are they all right?" Debby asked. "I mean Lizzie and the baby?"

"Couldn't be better, Idy says." Aussy looked at Web and Simon, his eyes bright with anticipation. "And I figure t'morra'll be just the right time t' go at him about his timber." Aussy stood there, hands in pockets, feet spread apart, wispy body teetering, his scrawny neck at a cocky angle and the seams and wrinkles in his face deepened by a wide grin.

Simon had to laugh just from looking at him. "Go ahead," he said. "But I wouldn't get to countin' on anything."

"Ye think Pa'd better do it?" Web asked Simon. "Seems as though he was gettin' kind of friendly to ye, bringin' around the pump, and I didn't know but we'd have better luck if ye talked to him yourself."

Simon shook his head. "Aussy's the one to see him."

"Eyah," Aussy said. "I'm littler than he is and I can talk to him without him gettin' a chip on his shoulder." His face grew sober. "The's just one thing I'm worryin' about: the most Otis ever sawed out in one spring was around five hundred thousand feet, and he had t' work from daylight t' dark t' do that. How are ye figurin' t' saw over ten times that much, even with a new wheel an' the dam fixed up, when ye got t' take the planks off the dam the middle of June and let the meadows dry out?"

"You better worry about gettin' the timber," Simon told him. "The cuttin' and sawin' won't bother us any."

"But we'd have t' cut around eight million t' bring in enough t' keep the town goin', and the' ain't power enough t' saw that much by the middle of June."

"It'll take nearer ten million feet," Simon said. "And I figure

it would take us till around the middle of September to saw it out. Now you hold on a minute," he said, as Aussy started to speak. "That meadow hay ain't worth a nickel when it comes to makin' milk, and nobody's goin' to say a word against us keepin' the meadows flowed if we give 'em good hay to take its place."

Aussy looked a little flabbergasted. "Ye mean ye'd—ye'd buy outside hay and give it to 'em?"

"Eyah," Simon said. "For the use of the meadows."

Web slapped his leg and laughed. "'Y Godfrey, now you're talkin'."

Aussy shook his head, and then began to grin.

"Ye better wait till we get that timber," Simon cautioned. "Wash would have to wait till the timber was sold before he could start gettin' his money, and he might have to wait quite a while. Brink said in his letter that money was gettin' kind of tight outside, and the country might be in for some more hard times. He said he was kind of glad we was goin' out of business."

Aussy's mouth pinched sideways and he grunted. "I been kind of figurin' the same thing, but the' ain't any need t' tell Wash about it."

"He won't hear it from me," Simon said. "But I got enough to keep us goin' for two years without any timber."

"And for half a dozen years if we did have the timber," Aussy put in.

"Long enough," Simon agreed. "Anyway, we can keep our stock and next year we'll likely have more hay and grain than we can use. And if times do get bad outside, we can live on what we raise and be ready to start right in shippin' again when things get better."

"Hard times are mean," Aussy said. He spoke gravely. "Mean," he repeated, and a gleam came into his eyes. "But we've always licked 'em—and I cal'late we'll keep on lickin' 'em just as long as everybody lends a hand. And that's what I'm figurin' Wash'll do. I'll see him t'morra and let ye know."

Aussy glanced at his grandsons, and said dryly to Web, "Ye better get them fellers home before ye have t' lug 'em."

"We ain't sleepy," Wallace protested.

"No," Ting said, and yawned and stretched.

Susan laughed. "Time to go home anyway," she said. "Come on, Web."

They all went out together, and Simon and Debby stood in the yard, refreshing themselves in the breeze.

"Still due west," Simon said. "And look at them stars." The' ain't any more rain up there than we got right here."

"What if it doesn't rain all summer?" Debby asked anxiously.

"It's goin' to be bad anyhow," he told her. "And worse if it don't."

"Would it be so bad if you could get the timber?"

"No. Nowhere near. I could borrow money from the bank on lumber—not much, mebby, but enough to keep on workin' awhile after my cash runs out. But I just can't figure Wash lettin' us have it. It's still growin', and ought to bring him considerable more money for every year he lets it stand—I mean for the next five-ten years."

Thinking about it kept him awake for hours that night. If he could only get that timber! He finally put himself to sleep planning what he would do if Wash did let them have it. Every man that had the time would be put to work fixing the dam and raising it to give a fifteen-foot head. It would be easy work while the stream was low, and stopping the leaks would help raise the water. He'd order a water wheel that would put out some real power, and by the time it had come and was installed they could use every team in the town hauling gravel to raise the earth wings of the dam. It was nice to think about, and the next thing Simon knew, it was morning.

He helped pump water till noon and came up and had his dinner. The afternoon went along in the same way, and still no sign of Aussy. Every little while Simon looked toward the road. He told himself it wouldn't do them any good even when Aussy did come. He hadn't felt like this since he didn't know when—as if he were being pulled out tight in several directions at once—and the tightness increased as the afternoon passed. The last wagon went up the slope with full barrels slopping. Simon followed it and went in the house, but Debby told him she hadn't seen Aussy.

Henry Locke came along and Simon went down for the mail. There wasn't any and he started home. When he reached the turn he saw Aussy coming up the road from the Thurston place. Aussy walked as if he were tired and had a sort of drawn look as he approached; but his eyes gleamed and he grinned as he came up to Simon.

"Get ready t' cut some timber!" he rumbled.

Simon just looked at him, and Aussy's grin widened.

"That's right," he said. "Wash told us t' go ahead an' cut it—said we could fix up the papers later. But, Godfrey, what a time we had!"

Simon still couldn't believe it. "Ye don't look like ye feel very good about it," he remarked.

"It ain't that," Aussy told him. "I'm just wore out. I dunno anything that make me tireder than just standin' still, and that's what I been doin' since around ten o'clock this morning. Let's go into your place an' set down, and mebby Debby could make me a cup of coffee."

"What kept ye standin' around so long?" Simon asked as they went in the house.

"Parker," Aussy said in disgust. "The dam' toad!"

"What's he got to do with it?"

Aussy shook his head wearily. "I can't figure it. Temp's will left some money t' Parker an' the girls, but everything else went t' Wash, and why he had t' see Parker about that timber——" Aussy shook his head again.

They went in the front door to the sitting room and Aussy sank down in a rocker with a sigh. Debby came in from the kitchen, and Simon said:

"Aussy's been on his feet since ten o'clock and he wondered if ye could make him up some coffee."

"Why, of course," she said. She started back to the kitchen and stopped. "You had any dinner?" she asked.

Aussy shook his head and grimaced. "I'm empty clean down t' my boots."

"You poor man," Debby cried. "I've already started supper and I'll have something for you in a jiffy."

"I went over t' Wash's just before ten," Aussy said, as Debby

went out. "He was feelin' pretty good an' took me in to see the baby. It's a right nice baby, an' Lizzie's lookin' good herself. Then we come out and I told him how things was and what we wanted. He studied over it, then he told me he reckoned he'd have t' see Parker about it first. He said Parker had something he wanted, and now was the time t' get it. And he looked mean, like he meant t' get it."

Aussy grimaced again. "I never put in such a time in my life. I hadn't figured t' go with Wash but he wanted me t' go along an' tell Parker what I'd told him. So I went. Parker wa'n't outside anywheres and we looked in the windows an' see him lyin' on a pile of dried grass that he'd got t'gether for a mattress. We like t' fell through the porch floor goin' in, and Parker was sittin' up lookin' scairt. Wash walked up t' him, and says:

" 'Aussy's got something t' tell ye,' and he looked at me.

"I told Parker about the timber and why we wanted it, and then Wash says:

" 'Now I want the rest of that letter.'

" 'What letter?' Parker says, and Wash tells him:

" 'You know what letter I mean. Ye been hintin' about it enough lately, and now I'm figurin' t' have it. Get it!' he says, and he give Parker a look that started him sweatin'."

Aussy wrinkled his nose. "Parker looked like he hadn't taken off his clothes or even washed his face since Wash turned him out. I never see a critter that come s' close t' makin' me gag. He just sat there like a dam' toad and he wouldn't say a thing."

Aussy broke off as Debby came in with a steaming cup of coffee and hot buttered biscuits.

"Supper'll be ready by the time you've finished that," she said.

He thanked her and took a large bite of biscuit and then a drink of coffee. "My," he said, "but don't that go to the right spot!"

Between mouthfuls of biscuit and coffee, he went on. "Wash kep' tellin' him t' get the letter, and Parker kep' sittin' there like he was dumb. I got hungry and then I kind of got over it—I wanted t' see how long Parker could hold out. Wash kep' at him, just wearin' him down, and Parker was gettin' yella.

"It went on like that till half an hour or so ago, and then

Wash says, 'I should of brought a gun. I'll go get it,' he says t' Parker, 'and mebby a couple of holes in your feet'll make ye talk.'

" 'Keep an eye on him,' he says t' me. 'I'll be right back.'

"When he was gone, I says t' Parker, 'What letter's he talkin' about?' But Parker didn't look like he heard me. He got up on his knees and looked out the window. Then he jumped up an' started out back. I grabbed at him and he give me a shove—" Aussy's eyes narrowed and glittered—"it's too bad ye wa'n't there, Simon." He shrugged. "Anyways, he run out back and across the field to the woods. Wash looked kind of funny when he come back; said he figured Parker was too scairt t' run off."

"Supper's ready," Debby called.

"Well," Aussy said as he got up, "that's about the whole of it—except what Wash said when we come away about our goin' ahead an' cuttin' the timber."

"He didn't say anything about how we should pay him for it?"

Aussy shook his head. "Not a thing. It didn't look like he give it a thought."

"Well, I guess I better see him about it and make sure. We don't want to start something we can't finish."

They went out to the kitchen to supper. After a little, Aussy said to Simon, "Ye got any idee what that letter might of been?"

"I'm thinkin' it's likely the one that Ma left for me," Simon told him. "You remember—the day Ma was buried and we come——?"

"Oh, sure," Aussy broke in. "Susan read it, and the last of it wa'n't there. What ye reckon was in it?"

Simon's eyes had a speculative squint. "I dunno, but the' was something Pa was goin' to tell me when I turned twenty-one. I cal'late we better go see Wash about it."

After supper he and Aussy started down the road. They stopped for Aussy to tell Ida where he'd been and that he'd had his supper. Then they went on to the Thurston place. Lizzie's mother came to the door, a robust, genial woman. She smiled at them as if there was nothing strange about Simon being there.

"Evenin', Lottie," Aussy said. "We'd like t' see Wash if he's around."

She stepped outside and faced the barn. "Oh, Wash!" she called.

There was no answer. "Well, that's funny," she said. "He et his supper and I thought he went out to the barn." She glanced at Aussy, and said in a low voice, "Mebby he's gone t' look for Parker."

"That might be," Aussy said. "And if he has, the's no tellin' when he'll be home. I reckon we might as well wait till morning," he said to Simon.

Simon nodded. "Might as well. But we better see if the stock's got any water—Wash ain't been after any today."

They went back to the big log trough in the barnyard. There was still some water in it but the barrels were empty, and Simon and Aussy yoked up the steers and loaded the barrels in the wagon. They went to the stream and filled the barrels and brought them back and filled the trough. Wash still hadn't come back, and they went home. At sundown the westerly breeze died, and then came back stronger as Simon and Debby went to bed.

39

SIMON slept fitfully. It was hot and sticky in spite of the breeze and several times he sat up, half awake, to cool off. Before daylight, he roused again, suddenly wide awake. His nose and throat felt dry and woody. He swallowed and rubbed his nose and sniffed. Then he shot himself out of bed.

Debby sat up, startled. "What is it?" she asked.

"Smoke," he told her. "The's a fire somewhere."

He went through the sitting room to the kitchen, and then out around the house. The air was heavy with smoke and before he had taken a dozen steps, he knew it couldn't come from the house. It swirled against his face in the darkness, coming downstream on the wind. The woods were on fire.

Simon hurried back in the house. "The's a fire up the stream," he told Debby. "Fix me something to eat that I can take along. I'll stop in and get it."

"You goin' up in the boat?" she asked.

"Not time enough—the stream's too low and we'd have to carry in a dozen places."

"But, Simon! You mustn't go into the woods—you might hurt your legs!"

He had forgotten his legs. He had one foot in his pants and stood there, motionless, for a long moment. Then it came to him what he could do.

"I'll borra one of Otis's hosses," he said, and got into his pants. "He's got a saddle—I see it the other day when I was helpin' him harness up, and I can put a blindfold on the hoss and ride him anywheres."

Debby didn't answer. She slipped out of bed and went to the kitchen. Simon pulled on his shirt and boots and went out to the road where he could look upstream. Far up there, over the tops of the nearer trees, a dull red glow spread murkily across the horizon. It was hard to tell, in the darkness, just how far up it was, but Simon placed it somewhere in Wash's timber. The tracts that Temp had bought were above Spring Brook and ran for two miles up the stream. In some places they ran clear through to the hill road, and in others only halfway or less. As he watched the line of fire, Simon knew it was all on the south side of the stream, and he had the feeling it was pretty well beyond Spring Brook. And if it wasn't stopped, the way the wind held, it would come all the way through to Spring Brook and lay waste not only to Wash's timber but to some four thousand acres of growing stuff below it.

Simon hurried down the road, shouting. Otis Wick came out, and Simon called, "Woods afire, up above Spring Brook. Get to the church and——"

"I'll go," Lish Morrison yelped. "I ain't no good in the woods, but my legs is still spry." He came running out of his dooryard across from Otis Wick's and scurried off, half dressed.

At that moment the church bell broke out, *glang-glang—glang-glang,* tolling the fire signal; ten double strokes and pause, ten double strokes and pause. Somebody else had smelled the smoke. Simon learned later it was Russ Graham, and he'd waked Ezra and Web and Ormond and had run on up to the church. Men, women and children appeared as if from nowhere, some partly dressed and some in their night clothes, carrying pails; and the men ran back to their homes for their teams and shovels and hoes and saws and axes.

In fifteen minutes the first wagons were rattling up the hill. Half a dozen had gone before Web came along with his driving team and carryall. He had Susan and Ezra and Otis Wick and Ormond Story. Simon hitched the big horse he'd borrowed from Otis to the back of the wagon and got in. They stopped at his house for his lunch. Debby was waiting for him with it.

"Be careful," she whispered to him. "Remember your legs—

and don't let the horse stumble!" She held his hand tightly a moment and then stepped back.

Another team came around the turn and Simon recognized the horses as Marvin's, then he made out Marvin and Aussy and Ida, and Nathan and Nellie Gregg.

"Ther's Ma," Web said. "She an' Nellie'll look after the hosses, and you better get out an' stay with the boys, Susan."

Susan got out, and Web turned his team into the road and up the hill.

At the top of the hill he let the horses out. They passed wagon after wagon, and Simon didn't see how Web did it. While the sky was beginning to lighten a little, the smoke was so thick that the pale yellow brown of the road showed through it only in patches. Simon guessed Web was letting the horses find the road for themselves. The similarity between this fire and the last one struck Simon. It had been broad daylight then and the fire was nearly out, but driving along the ridge this way was the same and the smell and taste of the smoke was the same. And there was something else that might be the same, he thought; but on second thought, he knew that if the last fire had been set, Wash certainly hadn't set this one.

The sky grew lighter and the road was easier to see. There were thin spots in the smoke now and Simon knew the wind must be backing into the south a little. That would help. The ridge fell away before them and over the trees he saw the billowing line of smoke, lighted by dirty white and rosy streamers where the fire leaped from the dull red glow underneath. Simon placed its location as well below the little bog. It must, he thought, have started almost on Wash's western boundary. He had again that vague feeling of suspicion, but there wasn't time to think about it now. They were within a mile of the fire and the dull roar and explosive snapping as fresh trees caught came faintly to them. He put a hand on Web's arm, and said:

"No use goin' nearer. It ain't crossed the road and the wind's holding it to the stream now. We got a chance to stop it—it ain't runnin' fast and if the wind keeps backin' into the south we'll have a better chance. We might try to stop it at Cedar Brook, but

that must be dry now, and the's three-four hundred acres of young stuff just the other side of it that'll burn faster'n a man can run. I'd say the best place was right down here below us. It ain't a hundred rods to where the hack swamp starts, and it runs into that alder guzzle that makes clear through to the stream. The' won't be any ground fire to bother us around there and we can trim out the cedar and black-growth and have us a break close to twenty rods wide. What ye think?"

"I think we better get at it," Web said. He slid out of the seat. "You get over here in front, Russ, an' take these lines. You can turn 'em over t' Ma when she gets here, and come on in. Stop the wagons here an' tell everybody t' head in kind of quartering—so," he pointed. "The hack swamp's upstream a ways from here."

Simon went back and untied Otis' big yard horse, tested the girth and hauled himself into the saddle. The horse snorted and pranced heavily a moment, looked around at Simon as if to see what manner of thing had climbed aboard him, and then moved off into the woods under Simon's guidance. The others got their tools from the wagon, tucked their lunches in their shirts and angled into the woods after Simon. It was still quite dark in the woods and he had to go slowly. Minute after minute passed and he began to think he'd missed the hack swamp. Then the horse stumbled over a fallen hackmatack and almost went down in the partly dried muck.

"Godfrey!" Web said, as he led the horse around the tree. "A little more of this drought and even the swamps would burn."

"We found it, anyways," Simon said. "And time we've got to where we can start cuttin', it ought to be light enough to see."

By sunup some sixty men were moving slowly along the western edge of the swamp toward the stream. Others joined them and the work of trimming and chopping and hauling off went faster. Still others followed with hoes and shovels and heavy mattocks, uprooting dried bushes and tufts of grass and taking them deep in the swamp. At seven o'clock they were in the alder guzzle, more than halfway to the stream. There was more young black-growth along the edge of the guzzle, thickets of fir and spruce the size of large Christmas trees, with occasional larger

trees among them. The choppers waded into the smaller growth, one or two blows to a tree, and others carried them to the eastern side of the guzzle. Crosscut saws took down the larger trees, trimmers lopped off the branches and skidded them away and the trunks were covered with dirt and left where they had fallen.

Air currents played tricks with the smoke, sometimes driving it away entirely, sometimes beating it down with smothering intensity. Simon had fastened a piece of sacking under the horse's bridle so it hung down below his nose, and he kept wetting it from time to time from holes in the swamp and guzzle. The men began to feel the heat, and now and then swirling sparks dropped around them. Simon rode through to the stream with half a dozen men and had them backfire the meadows and underbrush along the edge. He saw that the fire had crossed the mouth of Cedar Brook and was coming fast along the bend below the brook. Eddying air currents over the stream and guzzle made it difficult to tell the main direction of the wind. He rode as close to the fire as the horse would go and saw that most of the sparks and smoke were whipping north; a little west of north, if anything, and that was still better. He cupped his hat over his nose and trotted along the front of the fire.

It fell away in a flat arc toward the road. The wind was holding it back, blowing it toward the stream and, while it still made progress against the wind, it was coming very slowly. Simon was deeply thankful for the southerly wind. It was good timber all along here; tall pine and fir and spruce, and a westerly wind would start the crown fires leaping and turn it into an inferno. He watched it for several minutes and then rode back to where the men were working. If they could reach the stream before the fire reached the guzzle, they could hold it. He passed the word along and the grimy sweat-streaked men put forth fresh efforts. It was hot where they were working now, and they had to stop frequently and beat out sparks.

Simon divided the men into further crews, some notching and limbing, some sawing, some lugging off branches, some covering the fallen trees with dirt and sods. As fast as a tree fell, the sawyers would jump to a freshly notched one, the trimmers would swarm over the fallen tree and lop off the limbs, and by

the time the limbs were hauled off, the tree was covered with dirt. Men with hoes followed the shovelers, leaving nothing that would burn. When they reached the blackened meadow, the fire was less than two hundred feet away.

They had beaten it, but there was no cheering; the men were too tired and their lungs were too full of smoke, and they would still have to fight to hold what they had gained. Already they were spreading back along the edge of the guzzle to the hack swamp, watching for possible jumps across the break.

Simon and Web went along the line, seeing that no danger point was left unguarded. Between the hack swamp and the road they saw a number of men coming toward them. One stepped ahead, a big man, who reminded Simon of a lesser edition of Brink. He wore a black felt hat and checkered shirt and his gray woolen pants were rolled to the tops of his heavy lumberman's boots. Simon and Web recognized him as Vance Arnold, logging boss of the Ricker Mills Company.

" 'Y Godfrey," Web said. "It's good t' see ye!"

Arnold smiled and shook hands. "Looks like ye got it headed," he said.

"Eyah," Simon told him. "We made it, but it was kind of close. Ye got any more men than them?" Simon nodded to the men behind Arnold.

"Around forty-fifty," Arnold said. "They're strung out along the road an' down through here to the hack swamp. We backfired the upper end the first thing, and if the wind don't swing back t' the west we'll be all right."

"How's it now?" Simon inquired. "Hard to tell much about it down in here."

"Almost southeast and still backin' up." Arnold looked along the firebreak. "Ye done a good job. Got enough men t' hold it from here on?"

"Just about—till they rest up some."

"They got a good right t' be tired," Arnold said. His eyes narrowed. "Any of ye get up above here this mornin'?"

"No, this is the farthest we had time to come."

Arnold nodded. "I thought likely. I got t' thinkin' about that

fire that burned ye out a couple of years ago up there, and I thought I'd take a look this time. It started in the raspberry bushes in Otis Wick's big bend cuttings. I found what was left of some birch-bark torches."

Web and Simon looked at each other. Simon's teeth made a white line across his smoke-blackened face, and Web rumbled:

"It was set, huh? Much obliged, Vance."

Arnold nodded again. "I thought I'd tell ye. Well, I'll be gettin' back along the line. If ye need any help, get word to me, an' I'll do the same."

He went back along the firebreak toward the road. Simon and Web looked at each other again. Simon shook his head.

"I can't figure it," he said. "Wash come in with Freem right after us, and the' ain't anybody else——"

He broke off as he heard his name shouted along the line. He listened and learned that he was wanted at the stream. He trotted off. The fire had reached the guzzle near the stream and he could hear the hiss and pop of scorching alders. Heat beat against him and the noon sun blazed down through swirling smoke and cinders.

"Hey, Simon," Roger Benton called. "Henry Locke's down on the meadow. Wants t' see ye."

Henry?—on the meadow? Simon couldn't understand it. The mail had to go, fire or no fire, and Henry ought to be at Brent's Falls. There must, he thought, be some mistake, but he kicked the horse to a trot and headed for the meadow. Down there he passed Ezra and Wash and Otis and Lester Wick, and Lester waved him on to the meadow. Then he saw Freem and rode down to him. Henry was on the ground at Freem's feet, his shoulders propped against a brown ash. He was breathing heavily and his face had a purplish look. His hat was gone and his shirt and pants were torn and dirt-stained. He lifted a hand to Simon and leaned forward and took a deep breath.

"Winded," he said, and breathed deeply again.

Simon swung down beside him. "Take your time," he said.

"Lost too much—already." Henry made a weak gesture downstream. "Parker—firin' the woods——"

"Parker?" Simon cried in amazement.

Henry nodded. "Cedar swamp—raspberries——" he waved his hand weakly downstream.

Simon saw he was done, completely exhausted; but the information was sufficient. Simon stood up and bellowed:

"Old Dow cuttings—afire below us—pick twenty men—pass the word to Vance Arnold!"

He heard the message shouted along the line. A strong gust of wind came up the stream, driving back the smoke. Simon turned and it blew steadily against his face. It wasn't an eddy; the wind had shifted again and was coming nearly from the east. He looked down at Henry, and Henry gestured him downstream.

"I'll tend to him," Simon promised briefly. "You take it easy."

He climbed back on the horse and trotted down the meadow, wondering about Henry and how he'd seen Parker. Henry had evidently chased him but couldn't catch up with him. It was queer. The whole business was queer. So it was Parker who had fired the woods! It hadn't made sense before, and it made less now. Parker! It didn't seem possible. But Henry had seen him, and Henry didn't make mistakes like that.

Smoke was beginning to come upstream now. It hung low, under the trees, and Simon knew it was still a ground fire. He stopped a moment, uncertain whether to strike through the woods or continue down the meadows. A puff of smoke a short distance below him decided him, abruptly. It came floating up over the bushes. An eddy caught it and blew it out across the stream. The meadow was on fire and, from the look of it, Simon knew it had just caught or had just been set.

He swung the horse into the woods, circling to get around that end of the fire and come up on the windward side; and if Parker was there he'd have him cornered between the fire and the stream. The smoke got thicker and the horse began to stumble. He slowed down, picking his way between the trees. The fire was spotty, confined to the grass and raspberry bushes and dried-out tops where trees had fallen and made small openings. Simon was heading for a break in the fire when he saw a flicker of movement in the smoke. He peered at it and saw it was a man, run-

ning. None of the fire fighters had had time to get down here yet, and Simon knew it must be Parker. He kicked the horse and swung toward him.

They were coming together at a flat angle, nearer and nearer, and then Parker dodged out around a tree, saw Simon and stopped, jaw hanging, eyes staring. All at once he squealed and doubled back on his tracks. Simon put the horse after him, wondering why he'd stayed on the upstream side of the fire he'd just started. It came to him that Parker must be turned around or had been so busy he hadn't noticed the change of wind. Parker dashed one way and then another, always deeper in the smoke as Simon cut him off. Simon held his hat over his nose and mouth. Hot ashes pelted him softly and red streaks showed faintly through the swirling murk, hissing and crackling. The horse refused to go farther, reared and plunged away from the fire. Simon lost Parker, and then a spiral gust lifted the smoke and he saw him running desperately toward the stream.

The trees were fewer there and larger, and raspberries grew thick about them. Another gust sent a tongue of flame leaping through the raspberries, cutting Parker off from Simon. The horse was breathing heavily and Simon leaned forward and felt the sacking over his nose. It was dry and hot and he urged the horse back toward the hackmatack swamp where he could wet the sacking again. Smoke poured thickly past them and he swung the horse toward the road. In less than a minute they were out of the smoke, having come to the end of the fire that Parker had started there. Turning toward the swamp, Simon saw men coming, a line of them advancing on the ground fire. Then off toward the stream he heard a cry; a horrid cry, followed by horrid screams. They made Simon's skin crawl and he tried to force the horse toward them; but the horse, when Simon pulled his head that way, swung around in a full circle and headed for the swamp again.

They went through muck for a hundred yards before Simon found a wet hole. He got off and scooped out the black muck until water began to trickle in. He wet the sacking in it and sponged out the horse's nostrils. The horse made blubbering sounds and kept bobbing his head down, trying to reach the wa-

ter. Simon fastened the sacking to his bridle again and rode toward the stream. The only smoke he could see was well down toward the meadows, and by the time he came in sight of them the men had beaten out the ground fire in the woods and were holding it to the meadows.

Before he reached them, he heard his name called. He didn't recognize the voice, nor did he recognize the man when he turned. The man was over to his right on the blackened ground where the fire had so recently raced through grass and bushes. He was standing, and at his feet lay something black and twisted. As Simon rode nearer he saw that the standing man was Wash; but he had to get off and tie the horse and go forward on foot before he saw that the thing on the ground was Parker.

Parker lay inert, his body blackened, awful. What remained of his clothes seemed to be burned into him. His wide-open eyes had a dull, cooked look. Simon shuddered. There was no need to ask if this half brother of his was dead. His eyes came up to Wash's and they looked at each other. Wash glanced down at Parker and his eyes were smoky when they lifted again to meet Simon's.

"I can't figure him," Wash said. "He never was a human being and I'm——" Wash paused and made a sound of disgust. "Well, it looks like the things he's done and the things he figured to do had caught up with him. I feel like diggin' a hole for him right here and rollin' him into it."

Simon had the same feeling, but he shook his head and grimaced.

"I know we can't," Wash said wearily. Then his eyes flared. "But by rights, he'd ought to be left right here for the foxes!"

Simon gave him a questioning look, and Wash's lips curled.

"You don't know the half of it," he said. "The things he's done——" Wash stopped again. "But I couldn't prove nothing on him—he's been too slick till now. But this time he got caught at it!"

"Ye think he set that other fire?" Simon tilted his head upstream.

"Eyah, and that new house of yours; but the' ain't any way to prove it." Wash's eyes narrowed. "Word come from Watee-

gan when ye was hurt, that a feller had rolled a log at ye on purpose. That right?"

Simon held his breath and nodded.

"Ye ever see him before?"

Simon hesitated. "I ain't sure—his face was full of whiskers. But he was built like that big lumber hog ye brought down to the store last summer."

Wash's eyes burned. "I had an idea that might be how it was. I see Parker talkin' with him just before he left, and the next day I missed some money." A spasm of hate twisted Wash's face. "The's another thing—I'm just about sure of it, now—but I want to find something before I tell ye. Mebby I can't find it but anyhow, I know he didn't want Pa to tell ye something; and he didn't want you and me to—to get friendly. He tried to put ye out of the way, but it didn't work out, and this spring he started hintin' things to me. That didn't work out either and, last night, he come close to gettin' me." Wash's eyes flared again.

"He would of if I hadn't been lookin' for it. He come back to the 'hants' after dark like I figured, and he went into the house an' come out to the well, and then he went back across the field to the woods. He knew I was looking for something, and he figured I'd be there watchin' him—oh, he was slick! He figured I'd go to the well, thinkin' he'd put what I wanted down inside. It come to me just in time that I'd better be careful and I hunted round till I found the pole he used to dip water with. I started pokin' around in the well with it and, about two-three feet down, the pole hit some boards. I give 'em a poke and they busted and all the lining stones above 'em fell in. If it had been my foot on them boards, I'd be down at the bottom of the well with a cartload of stone on top of me." Wash smiled thinly. "But the 'hants' got him instead."

He looked toward the meadow. "Looks like they got it about out." He glanced up at the trees. "It's a good thing it was all big stuff in here—the' was enough got burned back yonder. How much ye reckon it got back there?"

Simon's mind was so full of what he'd just heard, that he didn't answer for a moment.

"Back there?—hard to tell," he said. "Anywhere from four

to six million feet, but I think the most of it can be saved. The' wa'n't enough small stuff and brush to burn the logs very bad, and if we get at 'em right after hayin' the' ought to be enough sap still in 'em to make 'em saw good. They'll be mean to handle but we can put it all into square-edge stuff and it'll work up all right. The worst job's goin' to be to find enough holes in the stream to put the logs in till we get enough water to run 'em down an' saw 'em."

Vance Arnold came up to them. He looked down at Parker and shook his head. "Some of your fellers over there—" Arnold nodded toward the stream—"said he was out in the clear when they come along, and when he see 'em he run right back into the fire. He must of been crazy."

"I cal'late he's always been kind of crazy," Wash muttered. "How we goin' to get him out of here?"

"The's an old wood road comes in this side the hack swamp," Simon said. "And we'd ought to be able to get a wagon down it if we brush it out. I'll take a look at it." He turned to Arnold. "How'd ye leave it up above?"

"Just coals, and they'd ought t' be burnt out by morning. But we better watch it for a couple of days."

40

Few people attended Parker's funeral. The service and burial were the next afternoon and besides the family there were only Ida and Aussy, the Grants and old Doctor Freem and Emma Luce. Of the family, Lizzie and Janice weren't there.

Standing beside the grave, Simon thought of his mother and he hoped for her sake that Parker had finally got on the right side.

They walked home from the cemetery in silence, fifteen people, who paused for a moment when Web and Susan and the boys turned in to their dooryard, paused again at the Luces', again at the turn when Debby and Simon and Margaret and Freem dropped out. Margaret and Freem went on up the hill and Simon and Debby stood in their dooryard watching the others. Simon couldn't help thinking how different it would be if his mother and Temp were in that group. Now, there was only Wash left to go back to the old home—but Wash had a baby as well as a wife waiting for him there.

Simon sighed and went in the house with Debby. He changed his clothes and went down to the stream and helped pump water the rest of the afternoon. Just before sundown, Wash came for his evening supply of water.

"I thought ye'd be in the woods," he said to Simon.

Simon gave him a one-sided smile. "I would be," he said, "but it takes a man with good legs to watch a fire, and I figured I'd be more use right here."

"But ye can tend to the loggin', can't ye?" Wash asked with some concern. "The' ain't anybody else around here that can

handle a big job like that, and I'd hate to see all that burned stuff go by."

"It won't," Simon told him. "I can get around good enough for that—on a hoss—and we'll catch it in time to save the most of it."

"Ye see Otis about the dam and a new wheel?"

"Eyah, and I fixed it up this morning with Charles and Levi about the meadows—and I know the others'll go along with them on it. I got the order for the wheel made out, but I've kind of got to know where I'm at on that timber before I get in too deep. Ye figured out yet how much ye got to get and when ye got to have the money?"

An expression came over Wash's face that Simon had never seen there before. It was so nearly a sly and scheming look that it reminded him of Parker. It upset him a little, and Wash's evasive answer upset him still more.

"Why, no," Wash said. "I ain't got round to it yet. I been lookin' for something that might make quite a diff'rence, and I only found it just before supper. I'll bring it over tonight—and I better get a move on if I get these barr'ls filled before dark."

They spelled each other at the pump. When the barrels were filled, Simon walked beside the oxen with him up the slope. Wash stopped them at the road to let them breathe, and looked at Simon in the deepening twilight.

"Queer how things work out, ain't it?" he remarked.

"Eyah, sometimes," Simon answered. "But I hope ye'll be easy on me with the timber—I won't be able to swing it if ye ain't."

"The' ain't much I got to say about that," Wash told him. "I was thinkin' about Henry. If he hadn't come along when he did and see Parker, the fire down below would of got a good start, and we'd never have caught him at it. Well—I'll be over soon as I get the stock watered. W-hysh," he said to the oxen, and prodded them with his goad-stick.

The oxen leaned against their yokes, the pole chain rattled and the wagon creaked forward. Simon walked slowly to the house, thinking of Henry Locke.

Henry hadn't been sleeping well and had gone out on his front

porch about midnight to sit in the breeze. The waning moon had just come up and he sat there watching the shadows change. He'd been there, he told Simon, about half an hour when he saw a man come up the hill walking in the grass beside the road, making no noise and legging it right along. There was something familiar about him, but it was some distance out to the road and Henry couldn't make out who it was. He didn't want to call out to him because he didn't want to wake his wife and daughter, and he sat there and watched the man go past. Wondering who it was and where he was heading had kept Henry awake still longer. Finally, he'd gone in and got to sleep. Later, the church bell had wakened them all and they had dressed and gone out, but had gone back to bed again when they found it was a woods fire.

"I didn't figure I'd be much good in the woods," Henry said. "And there was the mail to go."

They had all slept late and it wasn't till around nine o'clock that it came to Henry suddenly who the man was. Thinking of the last fire up there, and about Simon's new house, he'd put two and two together and harnessed his horse, and taking his daughter along to look after the horse, had headed for the fire at a gallop. Well down the ridge he saw a man cross the road with something bulky in his arms. He thought it was one of the fire fighters and slowed down. When they came to where the man had crossed, he saw a strip of birch bark lying in the road. There was no white birch between the road and the stream, but there was some on the other side of the road where the man had come from.

"I got out of the wagon and took a look," Henry said, "and found more bark both sides the road where the feller had dropped it. I knowed nobuddy'd be luggin' bark t' stop a fire, and it come t' me then what it was for. I told Patsy t' go on home and carry the mail herself, and I struck out after the feller. I was sure it was Parker, settin' more fires, and I run. I dunno how far I did run, and I couldn't find him. I was just about done and I thought I'd get me a drink, and when I got t' the stream I see smoke. It was half a mile or so above me and I run up there. I got there just in time t' see Parker duck into the woods. My

legs was gone—I couldn't hardly stand up, and I knowed I had t' tell you fellers about the fire down below ye."

Henry, Simon told himself, had just barely made it, and that was all. He shook his head and agreed with Wash that it was queer how things worked out. And there was Wash—what had he meant about not having much to say about the timber? He'd been pretty queer, himself, Simon thought, and his suspicions of Wash returned. He went on to the house.

"It's about time you came in," Debby reproved him gently. "I hope nobody else comes after water this evening. You've been on your feet long enough for one day."

Simon sat down and stretched out his legs and only then noticed that they did ache a little. It felt good to sit down. Debby came into the sitting room and leaned over the back of his chair, pressing her cheek against his.

"You think there's any danger of the fire breaking out again?" she asked.

"Not likely now," he told her. "Ezra stopped a while back and said they'd been all over the burn this afternoon and all they'd found afire was some snags. They knocked 'em down and busted 'em up and he said they couldn't find any more smoke after that. But they're goin' to watch it through tonight just to be sure."

"I hope you can save it," Debby said softly.

"We will—if Wash don't want so much money that I ain't got enough left for wages. But he hadn't ought to want anything down on that burned stuff, and the's enough of that to keep a big crew goin' till the freeze-up."

A horse and driving wagon clattered across the bridge. Simon leaned forward wondering if somebody was coming to see him. He peered out the window and recognized the driver only by his size as the horse made the turn and set off down the Falls road at a rapid trot.

"John Maxwell," Simon said. "If Wash's boy takes after John and Lizzie, he'll grow up into a quite a sizable feller."

Debby sat on the arm of his chair and curled her arm about his neck. "Yes," she said. "The Maxwells are all pretty big."

The silence deepened with the twilight as they sat there.

Simon began to think that John Maxwell's visit was going to keep Wash from coming back to see him tonight.

Lights were going out down the road; the Parkers', then the Davenports', and now the Greggs'. Simon was about ready to turn in, himself, when he heard a horse and wagon coming up the road.

"Sounds like John goin' home again," he said. "And if Wash ain't with him, we'll go to bed."

"Wash?" Debby said. "You mean you're expecting him?"

"Eyah. Didn't I tell ye? He said he'd be back as soon as he'd watered up, and he'd let me know what kind of a deal he'd make."

"Oh," she said, and slipped from the chair arm. "I'll light the lamp."

The horse and wagon came nearer, slowed at the turn and came straight on across into Simon's dooryard.

"Where's the hitchin' post?" Simon heard John Maxwell ask.

And Wash answered, "Over by the corner of the house. I'll tie him up."

They came around to the door and Simon met them there. John Maxwell came in first, a big ruddy man with a friendly twinkle in his keen gray eyes.

"Hello, John," Simon said. "I ain't see ye down this way in I dunno when."

Maxwell chuckled. "Been too busy this spring t' git much of anywheres," he said as they shook hands. "The Mills is nearer, but I ain't been there but a couple of times since mud-time—till we had t' start haulin' water."

Wash still stood in the door, as if he were waiting for an invitation, and Simon said, "Come in, Wash; and have chairs, the both of ye."

"Wash'll have t' do my settin'," Maxwell said. "I got t' git right on home. I just stopped in t' find out a couple of things. Wash was tellin' me about this timber business and I wanted t' find out if ye'd be hirin' any fellers from up our way and over t' the Mills."

Simon glanced at Wash. "If I got enough left to hire anybody, the'll be jobs for every man that can swing an ax or pull a saw,

or who's got a team that can haul gravel. That goes for anybody in the town except them at Ricker's Falls, and they got plenty water over there."

Maxwell smiled. "We figured it would be like that, but I just thought I'd make sure before I passed the word along. Now the's just one more thing—ye ain't a-goin' t' git yourself into a hole for money on this, be ye?"

"I cal'late that'll depend on Wash," Simon answered. "He——"

"I don't mean that," Maxwell interrupted. "I'm thinkin' about your gittin' back your money. One of the boys was down t' the Mills last evenin' and he said Irv Jessup had got turned down on a lumber sale in Boston—they told him money was gittin' s' tight down there they couldn't buy no more lumber fer a spell, and Wash and me got t' wonderin' how ye'd be fixed if ye had t' hold your lumber fer a year or two."

"Why—I cal'late I could hold out two years, mebby three, if Wash don't want too much."

Maxwell laughed. "That's all I wanted t' know. And now I'm a-goin' t' tell ye something: the Hill and the Mills is a-goin' t' vote almost solid fer ye this fall—and that won't leave Cy Whitly enough t' be worth countin'—if he runs. Ye know, Simon, they're already talkin' about sendin' ye down t' Washin'-ton two years from now."

"Washin'ton!" Simon laughed. "They better wait till they see how I do down to Augusty—if I get there!"

"Ye will, all right," Maxwell declared. "And ye mind what I say about Washin'ton." He moved toward the door. "Well, I got t' be gittin' along. I'd figured t' be home long afore this but that grandson of mine—" Maxwell grinned and looked proudly at Wash—"he's quite a feller, ain't he, Wash?"

Wash grinned and looked even prouder than his father-in-law.

"Don't come out with me," Maxwell said. "It's bedtime now and the sooner ye finish up with Simon the sooner ye'll be home."

He went out and Simon held the lamp by the window so he

could see to untie his horse. The wagon creaked and moved out of the dooryard.

"Come again," Simon called.

"You bet," Maxwell answered, and sent the horse at a trot down the hill.

Simon set the lamp back on the table and looked at Wash. "Well," he inquired intently, "what's your figure?"

For a moment Wash looked back at him just as intently, then his eyes flickered, crinkled at the corners and he looked as if he were about to smile. Instead, he became intent again, serious; and his voice was gentler than Simon had ever heard it, when he said:

"Ye remember the letter Ma left for ye, and all of it wa'n't there?"

Simon nodded. "Eyah," he said.

"I cal'late ye still got it—what ye had of it?"

Simon nodded again. "It's in my carpetbag."

"Well—" Wash reached in his pocket and brought out an envelope—"here's the rest of it. Parker tried to hold it over me, so he'd have a place to live and eat. He never told me just what it was, but, the way he talked, I got to suspicionin' it. And when I turned him out and he burnt the timber, I was just about sure. I know he hated me, but he hated you worse. Ye see—" Wash glanced at Debby and back at Simon—"Pa heired that timber from Ma, but it never rightly belonged to him, and I couldn't take it, either. Pa bought it for Ma, with money she heired from your pa. So the timber's all yours." Wash smiled a little. "You'll believe it when ye read the letter. Here." He held it out.

Simon reached dazedly and took it. His timber? He couldn't believe it. And still less could he believe that Wash could be that generous to him. There must be a catch in it somewhere. But Wash looked as if he meant what he said, and what could he gain by——

Simon wet his lips, and asked, "Where'd ye find it?"

"In the kitchen flue," Wash told him. "The' wa'n't any stove at the 'hants', and when I see the open pipe hole——" Wash smiled faintly—"why, I just raked out the old ashes from the

clean-out door and there was the letter on top of 'em. Now go ahead and read it—it won't take long."

Simon opened the envelope and took out the sheets inclosed. He recognized his mother's writing and turned to Debby. "Ye want to get the first part of it?" he asked her.

She went to their bedroom and returned with Cora's letter. Simon hadn't looked at it for years, and now he read it over, aloud, and continued with the part that Wash had given him. The second part told of the money Simon's father had left and how Temp had bought growing timber with it—ten thousand dollars' worth of young stuff—and another thousand had been lent to the town at six-per-cent interest for the taxes, and the interest left to accumulate against rising assessments as the timber got its growth; and how they had decided not to tell Simon about it till his twenty-first birthday.

A lump came in Simon's throat. So this was what Temp was—— He swallowed and looked at Wash. "I mind Pa tellin' me," he said huskily, "how he had something to tell me when I turned twenty-one; but when he—went into the ice hole, I figured I'd never know what it was."

Wash's eyes flared and he leaned forward, hands between his knees and his fingers locked so tightly the knuckles showed white.

"I cal'late," he jerked out, "that's what somebody else thought, too!"

Debby caught her breath, and Simon went cold with a sudden growing horror.

Wash nodded slowly and his lips writhed. "I cal'late Parker had it all figured out that Pa would never tell ye."

"Oh!" Debby cried, and put her hands to her temples.

Simon could only stare at Wash, and Wash nodded again, slowly, and said:

"Nobody was lookin' at 'em. All I heard was a funny kind of bump and then I see Pa slide into the water. But Parker had one of them short sled stakes in his hand." Wash's lips writhed again. "I hope he goes on burnin' for a thousand years."

Nobody spoke for several minutes. Wash sighed and gave

his head a shake. "Well, I guess I better be gettin' along," he said. But he made no motion to rise.

Simon had a sort of let-down feeling, himself. "Don't hurry," he said.

Debby looked at them. "How would you boys like some coffee?" she asked.

" 'Y gorry," Simon said. "That would go good!"

Wash's face brightened. "Eyah, it would," he agreed.

Debby smiled and went briskly to the kitchen. They heard the stove lids rattle and then the crackle of the fire. Simon looked at Wash and smiled a little. He didn't feel the need of speaking. And Wash smiled back at him as if he didn't feel the need of it, either. After a little, Wash tilted his long nose toward the kitchen and sniffed.

"My," he said, "but don't that smell good?"

Simon drew a long breath and let it out gustily. "Don't it," he said.

Debby came in with cups and sugar and cream and the coffee-pot on a tray. She put the tray on the table and poured the coffee and gave Wash and Simon their cups. Then she brought them the sugar and cream and poured a cup for herself.

Wash clicked his tongue, and ejaculated, "Godfrey, if this don't go to the right spot!"

They finished the coffee, and Wash again said, "Well I better be movin'."

And again Simon said, "Don't hurry."

Debby took the tray to the kitchen. Simon's eyes followed her and came back to Wash, and then dropped to his mother's letter. Suddenly he stood up and looked at Wash with kindling eyes. He cleared his throat, and said:

"Wash—will ye shake hands?"

Wash almost popped from his chair. His hand came out to meet Simon's, strongly. He began to grin and as it widened, Simon began to grin, himself.

Debby stopped short in the doorway and caught her breath. It wasn't just that they were shaking hands, it was the way they looked; and she hadn't seen Simon look like that since—since

before he was hurt. He was grinning—not just smiling—but grinning like a boy. Her eyes filled and she smiled softly as she watched him.

"Ye know, Wash," Simon said. "It looks like we been missin' something."

Wash gave an eager nod. "Ye mean——?" he paused as if a little uncertain.

"You and me," Simon said. "But we got the rest of our lives to make up for it, and I'd like to start it off right by askin' ye a favor."

"Eyah?" Wash grinned. "Well, you name it."

"I want ye to take half of this timber."

A queer look came over Wash's face. Then the grin came back with a diffident twist, and he shook his head. "Anything else," he said. "But I—I couldn't do that, Simon."

"Why couldn't ye?"

"Well—it was your pa's, and I wouldn't feel right about it."

"Ye wouldn't?"

Wash shook his head. "No—I just couldn't do it. But I'm right obliged to ye, just the same."

Simon, strangely, felt both disappointed and pleased. "Well, dang ye," he grinned, "ye'll have to let me pay ye back what ye've laid out in taxes, anyhow."

"Ain't laid out a cent—and the's still enough of that money left to pay 'em for three-four more years."

Simon looked at him closely. Then he chuckled, "Mebby I better look it up on the town books. But I'll make it up to ye, somehow."

"Ye won't have any trouble doin' that," Wash laughed, and his voice had a deep note of satisfaction. "Well, if I don't get goin'——" he glanced about for Debby. She still stood in the kitchen doorway, and he said to her, "Come up and see that baby of ours."

"Oh, we will!" she promised.

And Simon said with feeling, "You're mighty right we will."

Wash grinned at them. "Come soon," he said, and ducked out the door like an eager boy.

Listening at the door, Simon heard Wash's boots strike the

graveled road and go striding on toward home. Debby came up and slipped her arm through his and pressed it against her. Simon stood looking after Wash.

"Just like Pa," he said, and his voice was low and full of affection.

Debby gave his arm a squeeze. He looked down at her tenderly. Suddenly he swooped her up in his arms and sat down with her in his big chair. After a little he chuckled, a deeply amused chuckle.

Debby slanted her eyes up at him. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"Oh—nothin' much."

"Go on, tell me," she demanded.

"Why—I was just thinkin' what John said—about their sendin' me down to Washin'ton."

"I don't see anything funny about that. I think it's just what you were meant for."

"Me?—why, with all that timber up the stream to tend to, I'll have a hard enough time gettin' as far away as Augusta—if I get there."

Debby laughed softly. "You're the funniest man—of course you're going to Augusta, and you'll go to Washington later on, too. You know very well you will. You're in it now and you couldn't help it if you wanted to—which you don't."

He looked down at her and then out the window at the night and wondered if she were right. The timber upstream seemed to fade away to relative insignificance when compared with the needs of his friends. And all these people were his friends—even Wash.

A delightful warmth crept through him. It was queer, he thought, how things worked out; give folks a chance to help one another and everything came out fine.

THE END

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(*Continued from front flap*)

although she had to tell him she was bearing Hastings' child. There was no official record of her first marriage—just the inscription in the Bible, and Temp didn't want to show that. Gossip hounded them, and Temp, with Cora and the baby, pulled up stakes and went up north to Franklin County.

This is the story of that little boy, through his rugged boyhood and stalwart youth and

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